

KNOWING THE SHEPHERD

A Message About God's Care The Lord Is My Shepherd (Part 1)

My Mother's Psalm

My mother helped me memorize Psalm 23. Like so many of the good things she did for me when I was a child, she does not remember this, but I do. I recall how, one summer, when I was a child, she enrolled me in Daily Vacation Bible School at a local church. They challenged us to commit to memory some simple passages of scripture, and it was my mom who sat with me as I read and then said those words until that scripture settled someplace deep within my mind. My mom helped me memorize John 3:16-17. She helped me memorize most of John chapter 1 and key verses in Romans. But it was the 23rd Psalm that I loved most in those days and have repeated most often through the years.

I know that I'm not alone in this. Psalm 23 may well be the most quoted, memorized, cherished passage of scripture in all of Western civilization. It is read at weddings and funerals alike. It is enjoyed equally by children and seniors. Even those who don't think of themselves as particularly religious often find themselves strangely comforted at the sounding of those familiar words about shepherds and green grass, about rods and staffs and cups overflowing.

That's increasingly strange, if you think about it. Very few of us anymore live around sheep or have ever even seen a shepherd in the flesh. There are nuances of meaning and entire frames of reference in the 23rd Psalm that most of us have no idea about. And it is partly for that reason, and partly to honor the gift my mother gave me, and greatly to honor the God to whom mothers and fathers and all of us keep looking for strength -- that I'd like to reflect with you today and in the weeks to come on this magnificent passage. My goal is that by the end of this series, you will have memorized this passage for yourself, if you haven't already, and that not only the words about the Shepherd, but the glorious love of the Good Shepherd himself will have found a deeper place in your heart.

A Declaration of Dependence

Let's begin today with just opening affirmation contained in the first six syllables of the first verse of Psalm 23: "**The Lord is my shepherd.**" Have you ever given any serious thought as to what that really means -- because, on one level, these words at the start of Psalm 23 are a scandalous statement? They are an absolute affront to that individualistic, self-reliant spirit that characterizes our nation. As sociologist Robert Bellah points out, deeply embedded within the American consciousness is a mistrust of authority -- a sneaking suspicion that to give anyone else a controlling interest in our lives is either an admission of weakness and incompetence or else a license to be abused and manipulated.¹

We therefore work terribly hard to be socially independent of our parents when we are young, and financially independent of our kids and others when we are much older. We bristle when other people give orders, and squirm uncomfortably at the thought of being beholden to anyone. We're not interested in being corralled or domesticated. We would much rather run wild and free, wherever and whenever we choose. And I contend that this is not just the American spirit, it's the human spirit that operates this way.

That's why it is so remarkable for anyone to say, sincerely: **"The Lord is my SHEPHERD."** You see, to identify someone as your shepherd is to identify yourself as a SHEEP. And, as David -- the author of this Psalm -- knew well from personal experience in the field, the chief characteristic of sheep can be summed up in one word that flies in the face of contemporary ideology. That word is "dependence." Sheep are utterly dependent upon the shepherd for their food, for their direction, for their protection, for deliverance in times of illness.

Leith Anderson, to whom I owe some of the best insights of this message, puts it in these terms: "When we say another is our shepherd, we are saying *we need help.*" More importantly, "when we say the Lord is our shepherd, we are saying no one is better able to help us than God himself."² That's always been hard to grasp. The Bible says, and I quote, that as **"Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease, he saw the crowds, [and] had compassion for them."** Do you remember why? It was **"because they were harassed and helpless,"** like what? **"...like sheep without a shepherd."**³

I think he looks with compassion on some of us too. So many of us rush or wander around as if we had no one but ourselves to count on, nothing but our own resources to draw on. But that's not true -- there is a Shepherd -- and there's no shame in admitting that compared to his wisdom, we are foolish; that compared to his strength we are weak.⁴ The strongest, wisest people I know are people who -- like David before us -- dared to make a Declaration of Dependence upon God -- to say "the Lord is my Shepherd." Have you? I don't mean from the lips; I mean from the heart. There's such good reason to. As Anderson says: "God is absolutely trustworthy, and we can depend upon him. He has never been known to permanently harm one of his sheep. He's never lost a single one of them. This great Lord is so committed and dedicated that he is even willing to put his life on the line for one single lamb."

A Brand of Belonging

Which brings us to a second aspect of the meaning of this powerful first verse. During the two years I lived in Northern Ireland many moons ago, I worked for a few days each Springtime at a sheep farm located in County Donegal, in the wild northwest of Ireland. Springtime, as you know, is when the new lambs are born. I noticed that the real-life shepherds there gave to the lambs a splash of red spray-paint on the wool shortly after birth, and eventually a plastic tag on the ear. In biblical times, shepherds used to take a

knife and make a distinctive notch in the lamb's ear. Whatever the method, the purpose of the marking was the same. What do you think it was? It was a Brand of Belonging. It made it clear by whom this lamb was owned.

Scripture says that's the way it is with you and me too. From our very birth, we have belonged to God. We're tempted at times to think that God exists for our benefit and pleasure, but actually it's the other way around. The human race belongs to him. We've been branded with his very image. Yet because he loves us so much, God refuses to chain us to himself. Instead he takes a terrible risk. He gives us perfect freedom to seek him, to love him, or NOT. In Isaiah 53:6, the Bible teaches that in our freedom **"we all, like sheep, have gone astray."** Each of us -- in one sense or another -- has wandered off to distant fields, lost our way, followed after lesser masters, or sought to be our own. The scriptures say that, as a result, humanity has wound up on the auction block of judgment bound for the slaughterhouse.

But then comes the awesome news. Listen carefully, because it works sort of like this. Suddenly the Shepherd shows up at the auction. He points to you, and says to the auctioneer: "Hold on just a second. You know the wool's gotten awfully dirty and matted on that, but I can still make out my brand there. That one belongs to me." The auctioneer protests, saying: "Look, you've got to pay a very high price if you want this one." And without a moment's hesitation, the Shepherd willingly pays out an extravagant price -- far above market value -- to buy you back. He stamps the deal with his own body. He signs the deal in his own blood. That's what a Christian means when he or she says that **"the LORD is my shepherd."** It's not just a *declaration of dependence*; it is a testimony that he or she has been *branded as belonging* to the living God himself.

A Refrain of Relationship

I'm told of a pastor who was called one night to the bedside of a terribly sick child. By the time the reverend arrived, the four-year-old boy had drifted into semi-consciousness, and it was clear that this little lamb wasn't going to come back to his mom. It was difficult to tell whether the boy could hear a thing, but the pastor spoke what simple words of care he could and, when words failed, the minister just silently prayed, held the boy's hand, and then late that night quietly slipped out.

Early the next morning, the pastor returned to find the boy's parents in agony. Their little one had gone in the night. In between spells of crying, they told him how much it had meant to them that he'd come the night before, how quietly their son had passed away, and how strangely he had held his hands all night long. "What do you mean?" said the pastor, suddenly sitting up straight. The child's mother explained. "Well, for hours he just held onto the ring finger of one hand with the other hand. It was like he wouldn't let go." It was then that the pastor described what he'd said that night in the boy's room.

He'd wanted to communicate in terms a child could understand what it meant to not only be a Christian, but to BECOME one. He said that he'd taken their son's hand, held his thumb, and said: "**THE** -- because we're talking about one of a kind." Then he'd taken hold of the next finger and said: "**LORD**." For the next finger, he said "**IS**" -- "The Lord himself, IS right here, with you." And holding the fourth finger, the pastor said: "**MY** -- a personal commitment, a personal relationship." And for the last finger, he said: "**SHEPHERD**" -- the one to whom we belong, who died for us, who cares for and loves us always -- Jesus." The child had not spoken, but he had heard. And before he left this world, he put his hand around his ring finger in order to say: "**The Lord is my shepherd.**"

Is He yours? Those five words are above all else *the refrain of relationship*. Can you say them with personal conviction? In a few moments, we're going to pray. If you would like to claim the Lord as your shepherd -- for the first time, or as a way of embracing the truth in a more personal way -- then I invite you to take your hand and hold onto that ring finger. In so doing, you'll be saying for you and God alone to see: "Lord, I hereby declare my dependence on you. I want the blood of Christ to be the brand that marks me as belonging to you. I rejoice that I have a relationship with you that is personal and possessive in the best sense of both."

Please don't do this blithely or half-heartedly; for what we're talking about here has to do with the very orientation and commitment of our souls -- here and now and for all eternity. Only do this if you mean it, if you sincerely want these affirmations, these assurances to be yours, and are prepared to follow this Shepherd where ever he leads from here, then please join me in prayer. It may be the answer to your own Mother's prayer, if you do this. It will certainly be the answer to God's.

Let's bow together...

Lord, our Good Shepherd, gaze now upon our hands. Look now upon our heart. For some of us, what we do now is but an affirmation of a choice made many years ago -- a surrender to You, a confession of sin, an acceptance of Jesus Christ as the one Savior worth receiving, the one Shepherd worth following. For others of us, today is the day of decision. In this moment now, some of us commit our life to You. With our hearts and now also with our hands, we come to You table saying with joy: "The Lord is my Shepherd." Amen.

If you prayed that prayer for yourself today, would you let one of us know that you did so that we can suggest a next step? Just approach one of us after the service today and we'd be honored to share the joy of this moment with you and suggest where you might go from here.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER & DISCUSS

1. Have you ever memorized scripture or taught others to do so? Why or why not? What might be the value of it?
2. Have you made a “Declaration of Dependence” upon God? How do you experience yourself as “dependent” and how does this feel?
3. How hard or easy is it for you to integrate into your sense of identity that you “belong” to Christ? How does your sense of “belonging” show in your life?
4. Was there a specific time in your life when you said: “The Lord is MY shepherd,” because you felt that “relationship” in a “personal” way? If there was such a time or times, describe that? If it’s still hard for you to feel the “MY” part, talk a little bit about that in the safety of this place.

¹Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism & Commitment in American Life*.

²Leith Anderson, “The Lord Is My Shepherd,” *Preaching Today*, Number 136.

³*Matthew* 9:35-36.

⁴*1 Corinthians* 1:25.