

THE GRASS IS GREENER

A Message About God's Provision The Lord Is My Shepherd (Part 2)

The Shepherd & His Sheep

While traveling through Ireland many years ago, my friend Ian MacPherson and I stopped at an old monastery on the southwest coast. We hiked up into the hills, toward a stone crucifix the monks had placed atop the highest bluff. By the time we reached it, the sun had descended to that magical place where all the colors of creation just seem to turn incandescent. The hillside actually continued on to a vantage point just slightly beyond and above the cross. From there we could gaze down and see the world from almost the same angle as the occupant of that cross might. Just thinking about that scene still makes my heart thump. Ireland, as you know, is famous for its 40 shades of green. Well, on that spring afternoon I believe I saw them all at once, coloring those hillsides that cascaded away beneath our feet toward the sparkling sea.

But next to that cross it's not those hills that I remember most. It was the hundreds of *sheep* that speckled those steep hillsides. The way the sun hit their wool almost made them seem to glow a pinkish white against the lush green carpet and the lengthening shadows. I'd always thought that sheep weren't particularly *bright* creatures, but you'd have had a difficult time that day making me believe it. For a moment they almost looked like supernatural beings. Those closest to us were lying down, many of them munching happily on the cool sweetness of the thick green grass, staring dreamily away into space. I know it sounds crazy, but those creatures looked as if they were onto something: A perfect peace. A spirit of contentment. A simple confidence in the future that I'd been searching for all of my life.

I will never forget the image of that watchful One on the cross... of those sheep on the hillside... and each brings to life for me the words of the Psalmist: "**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.**" It's a magnificent vision, isn't it? Who of us, in our right mind, doesn't want to be there? I mean really living it -- the life of perfect peace, of pure contentment, of simple confidence in the fulfillment of our deepest needs. That's why I want to share some good news with any who may be too harried or hurried amongst us today. I want to tell you that there's something we can learn even from sheep -- something about how we also can lie down in green pastures like that.

Free of Fear

But there's one thing we need to understand from the start. Sheep don't really find it much easier to get to that place than we do. In fact, do you realize that it is actually extremely difficult to get sheep "**to lie in green pastures**" or any place else for that matter? One reason is that sheep are tremendously timid creatures by nature. Now don't hold the sheep you meet at the zoo or Nativity scene to this standard, but in a

natural setting even a jackrabbit suddenly leaping from behind a bush can stampede a whole flock. Sheep are such skittish beings that just being spooked like that can make mothers miscarry their young.

You sure wouldn't know that just looking at them. With all that fluffy padding to protect them, you'd think they'd be unafraid of much. Then again, I know plenty of people who are a bit like that too. They're apparently well-padded -- with money or prestige, with education or position -- but when it comes right down to it they're sort of skittish too. They'll bolt quickly from committed relationships. They'll run from one job or church to the next. They see enemies, opposition, or reason for worry looming behind every bush. They find it hard **"to lie down,"** to find real peace or rest, because to do so -- it's a well-known fact -- sheep must be almost free of FEAR.

Isn't it a good thing the Shepherd knows that? Philip Keller, a real-life shepherd, says that that's why a good shepherd doesn't just watch from a distance but walks among his flock by day and night. It's because nothing so calms the sheep as to see the Shepherd walking in the field. The very sight of him soothes their nerves and steadies their spirits. It lets them know that if anything really dangerous should come near, someone even stronger and wiser is ready to act on their behalf.

Do you think that might have anything do with why the God chose to become flesh and walk amongst us? Or why, in Psalm 121, David takes pains to remind us that the Lord **"who watches over you will not slumber or sleep."**¹ Could it possibly be why Jesus said: **"I will never leave you nor forsake you..."**² for... **"Lo, I am with you always."**³ Or why the message of angels and apostles alike almost always comes down to two words: **"Fear not!"**⁴ I don't know any better way of saying it: The ground of your life may be uneven. The wind or the wolves may be howling. But the Good Shepherd is walking amongst us. It is safe to lie down and rest.

Free of Friction

But fear's not the only thing that keeps sheep from enjoying the peace and contentment most would like to have. I'm told that to lie down, sheep must also be free of FRICTION. By friction, I mean social tension. You see, sheep can't bear to be pressed up against one another. They almost never lie down till they've established their own space. Maybe you knew this from that Understanding Sheep 101 course you took at school, but I'm just learning. I found out that just as chickens have a "pecking order," so sheep have a "butting order." The toughest old ewe will drive others away from the best grazing or the best bedding ground by "butting" them with her head, or charging them with stiff-legged gait. Following her example, a descending order of rank will be established by the other sheep, using this same butting technique. When this tendency goes unchecked, this results in a tremendous natural tension within the flock. The sheep become edgy and irritable. All this direct conflict or subtle competition eventually compromises not just the health of individual sheep, but the well-being of the whole flock.

Aren't you glad that's a problem confined to sheep? I mean can you imagine if that was a problem people had too? If we were constantly fighting to see who the "Top Sheep" was; if we were subtly vying for position, charging each other, protecting our ground. Why we'd never be able to really lie down. We'd be continually "standing up" to protect our turf or our rights or our reputation. God forbid that should ever be so in our family or business or school or church!

But if it were, I pray that there would be a Shepherd to intervene. You see, I learned in my reading that that's exactly what good shepherds do; they intervene. Sometimes, the shepherd steps in to trounce the offending sheep. This may mean anything from a verbal reprimand, to a whack with his staff, to the ultimate penalty. Although it breaks his heart to do so, in the end a shepherd may actually be forced to destroy a sheep who insists -- consciously or unconsciously -- upon bullying others. Most of the time, however, the shepherd simply shows himself to the flock. I don't know why it works, but it is a certifiable scientific fact that the more the sheep see of the shepherd, the better they get along with one another.

I think that's true with us too. I believe that if we could fully tune in to the Shepherd's presence amongst us... if you and I were aware right now of the presence of Jesus Christ that is here in the room with us... a lot of our petty rivalries and social strivings would cease. Why is that? Because one look at the tears of compassion in the Shepherd's eyes will remind us that those we regard as "the least and the last" aren't in His sight. It is because we would see that Jesus, the Good Shepherd -- the One who is Savior today and Judge tomorrow -- is not warmly inclined towards sheep that head-butt others of his flock.

Jesus offers this word of challenge to the head-butters: Remember, "**the first will be last and the last will be first.**"⁵ And he offers this word of comfort to the ones who have chosen to back out of the game. "**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.**"⁶ As any shepherd will tell you, it is the especially those sheep who have been persecuted and not lashed back who gain a higher place of affection in the shepherd's eyes. But there's more. It is, ironically, the sheep at the bottom of the butting order that are frequently the calmest, the best rested, and the most healthy. For it's these ones, more than the others, who have time to lie down. Which kind are you?

Free of Hunger

Every one of us, I imagine, wants the contentment, peace, and fulfillment symbolized by that vision of those sheep resting and grazing upon the hillside. To gain that position means finding freedom from fear, from friction with others, but also something else. To lie down, sheep must be free of HUNGER. Until they are well-fed, sheep are as restless as a pack of middle schoolers after an athletic game. They will remain on their feet, foraging around for a better mouthful to fill their growling bellies. Finding sufficient food is sometimes harder than one might think, at least it was in the day when David wrote this Psalm. You've got to remember that the terrain near Bethlehem -- where

David kept his father's flocks -- was nothing like that lush setting in Ireland. No, the land of the 23rd Psalm was naturally arid, brown, and sun-baked.

But please remember how much the Good Shepherd loves his sheep. He can't bear the thought of seeing his lambs thin, and restless, and miserable. And so, though the sun is scorching hot, he begins clearing the rough, rocky land. Though there are thorns and snakes to contend with, he tears out the brush and gnarly stumps. Though the ground is hard-baked, he deep-plows and prepares the soil. Though the expense is great, he carefully seeds the land with grains. Though the work is back-breaking, he painstakingly digs the trenches that will irrigate his pastures. And though a lesser shepherd would have given up long ago, and settled for scraggly sheep, the good shepherd daily tends the crops of forage that will feed his flocks.

That's also the vision that God, our Shepherd, has for you and me. He longs to see us well-rested and fed -- lying down amidst luxuriant pastures, experiencing -- in Jesus' words -- "**the abundant life.**"⁷ That's why God labors to clear our life of stony unbelief. It is why He works to tear out the roots of sin within some of us. It is because the Good Shepherd wants us to know life abundant that He strives to plow up the hard, proud heart which in some of us is set like sun-dried clay. Its love for us that makes Him sow the seed of His Word, which, if given half a chance to grow in us will produce rich crops of contentment and peace. He irrigates the ground of our lives with the living water of His Holy Spirit. He tends and cultivates the new life, longing to see it become lush and green and productive. In the words of one author: He longs to give to you and me a "life of quiet overcoming; of happy repose; of rest in His presence; of confidence in His management."

I Shall Not Want

What a Shepherd we have. In the end, I think that's what it means for a sheep to say, "**I shall not want.**" It's sort of like that little girl who got the words to the Psalm all mixed up and said: "The Lord is my shepherd; I don't want anything else!" There's a lot of wisdom in that reading of the text. Those who have a relationship with the Shepherd don't worry so much about their other wants. They know that above all else they've been provided for in the one arena that counts most for sheep. They can say with serenity "*I shall not want*" for a Good Shepherd.

I wish it were that way for everyone. In his book, *A Shepherd Looks at the Twenty-Third Psalm*, Phillip Keller tells of viewing with sadness the mangy, dehydrated, underfed, parasite-ridden sheep that belonged to his neighbor. They were required to gnaw away at brown fields and impoverished pastures. They had only polluted, muddy water to drink. There was inadequate shelter or trace minerals needed to offset the effect of sickly pastures. They fell prey to dogs, cougars, and rustlers. Keller says: "I can still see them standing at the fence, huddled sadly in little knots, staring wistfully through the wires at the rich pastures on the other side." But they belonged to the wrong master.

Which side of the fence are you on? Martin Luther once said that the only way we can ever say: **“I shall not want”** is if we can FIRST say **“The Lord is my Shepherd.”** Friends, it can be for you and me like those sheep upon that Irish hillside. We can lie down where the grass is greener, because we have not just a shepherd -- but the good one -- Jesus Christ, the Lord.

Let us pray...

Lord, there is probably not a person here today that would not like some portion of what I have said to really be true for him or her. We want to experience that refreshing peace, contentment, and confidence symbolized by those resting sheep of which Your servant David spoke.

We give You thanks O Lord that You have done what we could never have done for ourselves. Through Christ's sacrifice on the cross You have cut a permanent hole in the fence between the fields of the bad shepherds of this world and those life-giving meadows that belong to You.

Now we ask you to so fix our eyes upon Your daily, moment-by-moment presence with us, that we will be set free from our fears... set free from the need to fight one another for position... set free from our gnawing hungers. In this way enable us to more fully lie down in the green pastures of your loving provision. Through Christ the Lord, we pray. Amen.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. *How is your life or your capacity to rest affected by...*
 - *FEAR?*
 - *FRICTION with others?*
 - *HUNGER of one kind or another?*
2. *How do you think God addresses or wants to address these issues in your life?*
3. *What is the takeaway from this message for you? What was the “ah-hah,” “oh-no,” “huh,” or “hmmm” for you?*

¹ Psalm 121:3-4

² Hebrews 13:5

³ Matthew 28:20

⁴ Genesis 15:1; Genesis 26:24; Genesis 46:3; Deuteronomy 31:6; Judges 6:23; Isaiah 37:6; Jeremiah 1:8; Ezekiel 2:6; Matthew 1:20; Matthew 28:5; Luke 1:13; Luke 2:10; Luke 12:32; John 14:27; Acts 18:9; Revelation 1:17; Revelation 2:10

⁵ Matthew 20:16

⁶ Matthew 5:7

⁷ John 10:10