

## **THE HEART OF A SHEPHERD – PSALM 23 (SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF A SHEEP)**

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60+ Class

- 1. Shepherding and sheep are vivid metaphors in the Old Testament:**
  - God called Israel His sheep and their leaders as shepherds in a bunch of places.
  - Israel often thought of God as their shepherd.
  - But the preeminent shepherd of the OT was King David.
  - When God sent Samuel to anoint a new king over Israel, he found David where you would least expect – as a lowly shepherd in the field.
  - In Psalm 78, the Psalmist ends by describing David as the Shepherd of Israel.
  
- 2. Sheep & shepherds are also all over the New Testament.**
  - In Matt 9:36, Jesus looks at His fellow Jews as “Sheep without a shepherd.”
  - In John 10:11, He says of Himself, “I AM the Good Shepherd.”
  - Paul tells elders in Acts 20:28-29 to shepherd the Church of God.
  - The word “shepherd” is also the word we translate pastor in the NT.
  
- 3. So, what better Psalm to look at a shepherd’s heart than – anyone want to guess? David’s Psalm 23 – “The LORD is my shepherd.”**
  
- 4. But we can’t understand the work and heart of a shepherd without understanding something about sheep.** And when we understand something about sheep, we understand something about ourselves.
  - Isaiah 53:6 says “All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way...”
  
- 5. I knew almost nothing about sheep until I stumbled across a pamphlet years ago about the 6 primary characteristics of sheep.** (I think by Zig Ziglar or Zola Leavitt.) Today I want to take each of those characteristics and connect them to Psalm 23 in sort of four steps:
  - (1) First the characteristic itself. Some of them are kind of funny.
  - (2) Second, see how we as sheep reflect that same characteristic.
  - (3) Third, look at a line in the Psalm where God responds to that characteristic
  - (4) Four, a lesson we can learn for shepherding others under our care.
  
- 6. Try to see yourself in some of these 6 characteristics – first as a sheep, then as a way to grow as a shepherd.**

## LESSON #1 – I LEARNED THAT SHEEP NEED FULL-TIME SUPERVISION BECAUSE THEY KEEP REPEATING THE SAME DUMB MISTAKES.

**(1) Sheep are the only herd animals requiring full-time supervision.** Others – cows, horses, goats – can be fenced, fed, watered, and checked on from time to time and will be fine. Not so sheep. They need constant attention. They don't learn from their mistakes. They just keep doing same old dumb things over and over. Pain and punishment have little effect. Have you ever seen trained sheep performing in a circus or on television? **NO!** Because they either stand there dumb as a post or they wander off.

**(2) Now we are trainable to some extent.** We all learn *SOME* things from our mistakes. We learn skills and knowledge. We create and invent. We write and compose and paint. But – as sheep – some things we just never seem to learn. *What are some of those things?*

- We promise to stop overeating, and then we pig out. [*I've been told that my spiritual gift is gluttony!*]
  - We pledge to get off drugs or alcohol and then binge.
  - We commit to controlling our temper and then fly off the handle.
  - We promise to keep a secret and then blab to everyone (or we *share*).
- Of course, these are not just issues of training. *Often they are issues of sin.*

**(3) What's the first lesson David learned about shepherds?**

A shepherd must be **FULLY COMMITTED** to his sheep.

**VERSE 1 -- *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.***

Do you hear that ring of confidence? *I shall not want.*

From his own perspective, David learned that His Lord was fully committed to him.

- The LORD – the covenant name of YHWH and all that implies – *is* my shepherd – not wants to be, or pretends to be or was or will be but **IS – RIGHT NOW.**

**(4) The LORD is *my* shepherd – a personal relationship, a personal commitment.**

**#1: A good shepherd is FULLY COMMITTED to his/her sheep.**

**LESSON #2 – I LEARNED THAT SHEEP ARE AFRAID TO DRINK FROM RUNNING WATER.**

- (1) **Now, I didn't know that. Running water tends to spook them.** They can be found grazing beside a fast flowing stream of cool, pure mountain water and never take a drink. But if they come upon a pool of stagnant, polluted water, they will drink – and get sick.
- (2) **People tend to satisfy their thirst with the wrong things or tend to forget to drink when they need to.** My trip to Nigeria as a “tough Texan” when I forgot to drink!!
- (3) **David's second lesson is that a good shepherd PROVIDES for his sheep – not necessarily what they WANT – but what they NEED.**

*VERSE 2 – He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.*

The two major sources of water for sheep are – guess what – the dew on the grass and water wells. Sheep start grazing in the early morning, and the green, dew-drenched grass can be a major source of water for them. The good shepherd knows where the still, quiet, pure water is, and he leads his sheep to that place to satisfy them and keep them strong.

**On first page of his famous autobiography, *The Confessions*, St. Augustine wrote, “O God, You have made us for Yourself, and our souls are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”**

- (4) **We thirst for God. In John 7:37**, Jesus stood in the temple and cried out, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’ ”

*#2 A good shepherd PROVIDES for his/her sheep.*

*David, the shepherd, knew that our shepherd, the LORD, will satisfy the deepest thirst of our soul.*

## LESSON #3 – I LEARNED SHEEP CAN’T RIGHT THEMSELVES WHEN ON THEIR BACKS.

**(1) I think this is just hilarious.** When sheep fall and roll over on their spine, they don’t have the ability to get up. *“Help, I’ve fallen and I can’t get up!”* All their kicking and bleating doesn’t help, and they can’t help each other. And if they can’t get up, they can’t follow the shepherd. Only the shepherd can right the sheep.

**(2) Probably every one of us has had something happen to us where we were knocked off our feet and we just couldn’t get up.** We were so deep in a hole that down looked up, and we felt totally trapped. **ANY EXAMPLES?**

- We lose our job or our life savings.
- A spouse deserts us or dies, or a child runs away.
- A major move turned out to be disastrous.
- We were trapped in drugs or alcohol.
- A clinical depression set in.

**(3) What do shepherds do? The good shepherd RESCUES his sheep:**  
**VERSE 3a – *He restores my soul.***

That word “restore” implies that one has gone astray. Mistakes have been made, warnings not heeded, lessons not learned. The sheep is in trouble. He has strayed, wandered off, or fallen on his back. He needs to be restored, not only to a place of safety but a place of wholeness, acceptance. Not only physical but spiritual restoration.

Don’t we all find ourselves in those places? And we need a shepherd. We need a friend to reach down and pull us out. **Lyrics to James Taylor’s *You’ve Got a Friend.***”

When you’re down and troubled and you need a helping hand,  
When nothing, whoa, nothing is going right,  
Close your eyes and think of me and soon I will be there  
To brighten up even your darkest night.

You just call out my name and you know wherever I am,  
I’ll come running to see you again.  
Winter, spring, summer, or fall, all you got to do is call,  
And I’ll be there – yeah, yeah, yeah – you’ve got a friend.

**#3: *The Lord our Shepherd RESCUES us sheep.***

**LESSON #4 – I LEARNED SHEEP HAVE TO BE LED, NOT DRIVEN.**

**(1) One of the enduring images of the Old West**, at least in the movies, is the cattle drive. Cowboys whooping and hollering and cutting their horses back and forth to drive them up the trail or whatever.

**(RECALL Billy Crystal’s MOVIE *CITY SLICKERS*)**

**You can’t do that with sheep.** You try to drive sheep and they will scatter every which way. Their eyesight is lousy; they’re just as likely to run off a cliff as run in the direction you want them to go.

**But sheep have a natural tendency to follow.** So they must be led. And they depend more on their ears than their eyes for recognizing their shepherd. So they have to know the shepherd’s voice. And that takes time.

**What does that suggest about shepherding others?**

**(2)When we want to get something done, our human tendency is to drive people** – to crack the whip, to threaten them, to shame them. Sometimes it seems to work for a while, but it’s never a long term solution. People want to be led, not driven.

**(3)Fourth lesson: David learned that a shepherd LEADS his sheep:**

**VERSE 3b – *He guides me in paths of righteousness***, that is paths of rightness according to God’s character, ***for His name’s sake.***

**The Hebrew word for GUIDE here doesn’t have the idea of a tour guide who’s just trying to move the crowd in a general direction.** It means to guide with authority, with firmness. It’s the guidance of a good teacher or coach or a wise parent. It’s the word used of God guiding Israel through the wilderness with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

***Story of my Captain in Basic Training as we did ropes course.***

In John 10, Jesus says: ***“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”***

**#4 A good shepherd LEADS his sheep.**

**LESSON #5 – I LEARNED THAT SHEEP ARE DEFENSELESS.****(1)How come we don't have an NFL team called "the Austin Sheep"?**

**Imagine the Cheerleaders pumping up the crowd up by cheering "Baa, baa."**

Not going to happen. Why? Because sheep are wimps; they can't defend themselves. They can't run fast. Their bite is weak. Most have no horns. They don't have a powerful kick. They're easy prey.

**(2)As a pastor, I've often seen those who feel like defenseless sheep. Life has just beaten them down. They may put up a tough exterior. But deep down, they don't know where to turn. They need a shepherd.****(3)Lesson #5 for David: The shepherd PROTECTS His sheep.**

Note these first three verses refer to God in the third person. Now David becomes even more personal as he shifts to talking to His shepherd in the second person.

***VERSE 4 – Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.***

This rod was like a nightstick used to fend off predators. The staff, of course, is a shepherd's staff used to round up and direct the sheep.

But the important thing here is that the sheep don't see these as weapons but as means of comfort and protection for the sheep.

**(4)But the shepherd not only protects. He PROMOTES.**

He not only stands guard and wards off enemies trying to attack his sheep; he becomes their champion, their advocate.

***VERSE 5 – You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.***

The imagery shifts from a sheep pasture to a victory banquet – anointing – a sign of honor; the cup of the victor kept full.

## LESSON #6 – FINALLY, I LEARNED THAT SHEEP NEED THEIR SHEPHERD’S DAILY TOUCH.

**(1) Sheep will come to the shepherd daily and rub against his legs or wait for a pat on the head.** Once he’s gotten that bit of attention, he trots happily off to graze and get fat and grow wool which is the purpose of sheep.

**(2) None of us is any different.** Do you need a touch? Do you need a hug? Do you need someone to put an arm around your shoulder?

*(Some of us men say, “Whoa! Back off! None of that touchy-feeley stuff here!”)* Some here hunger just for someone to acknowledge that they exist! We desperately need that touch to know that we’re not alone, that we do matter, that we do have value and purpose.

**(3) Perhaps the most important lesson David learned about the heart of a shepherd is this last one:**

The good shepherd LOVES his sheep.

**VERSE 6 – Surely goodness and love [better translated, “lovingkindness”] will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

*God’s goodness* – He has our best at heart; He is good to us.

*God’s lovingkindness* – This Old Testament word is “*Chesed*” – kind of a combination of two words in the NT – **grace and agape love.**

It is God’s covenant love, His loyal love, that says He will never leave us or forsake us because he deeply loves us.

And look at the confidence, the satisfaction, the assurance that gives David:

***“For I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. I will forever be with my God.”***

## CONCLUSION

We are all sheep – often weak, often confused, but always in need of a shepherd. But God also uses us to shepherd others.

David knew the Lord as his shepherd, and that developed in him a heart to shepherd others.

- (1) A shepherd is **fully committed** to his sheep.
- (2) A shepherd **provides** for his sheep.
- (3) A shepherd **rescues** his sheep.
- (4) A shepherd **leads & guides** his sheep.
- (5) A shepherd **protects and promotes** his sheep.
- (6) A shepherd **loves his sheep** – wherever he finds them.

***Where has God placed you as a shepherd?*** This church? Your work place? Your family? David tells us how to shepherd.

***When have you needed a shepherd?*** Everyone of us needs a shepherd from time to time – not only Jesus, the Good Shepherd, but also a friend, someone willing to come alongside us who is committed to us, who is willing to lead and guide or just plain listen to us.

**I spent 20 years at the first church I pastored – both as an associate pastor and then as senior pastor. My departure in 2003 was a difficult time. I was 56 years old, and I wondered if another church would want me.**

**In my final service, the worship leader I had mentored led that service. Pete Hayes presented me with worship songs he had written on themes of many of my sermons. He titled this booklet, “Songs for my Shepherd.”**

**THE LAST PAGE ... “TO BE CONTINUED”**

To shepherd others, to grow the heart of a shepherd, we must first be shepherded.

And God has given us the Good Shepherd – His Son, Jesus Christ, so that we can say with David, ***“The Lord is MY Shepherd; I shall not want!”***

Suggestion from James K A Smith a week ago: Solitude & Silence on Psalm 23