

6. Psalm 23:1-3

October 11, 2007

Just about all of us, even non-Christians have heard Psalm 23 one time or another. It has been a comfort and strength to so many in times of difficulties. Even though it is only six verses, it has very deep meanings we can learn from.

A. Psalm 23:1a A Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd

The metaphor was a natural one for David, the shepherd-king. It was also a common metaphor in the ancient Middle East, as many kings compared themselves to shepherds in their leadership capacity. The prophecy of the coming Messiah incorporated the same in Isa. 40:11, and Jesus identified Himself as that expected "Good Shepherd" in John 10. He is also called the "Great Shepherd" in Heb. 13:20 and "the Chief Shepherd" in 1 Peter 5:4.

Obviously, David, in this Psalm, is speaking not as the shepherd, but as a sheep, one of the flock. He spoke with a strong sense of pride and devotion and admiration. It was as though he literally boasted aloud, "Look at who my shepherd is – the Lord."

It is He who brought us into being and no one is better able to understand or care for us. We all belong to Him simply because He deliberately chose to create us as the object of His own affection instead of making us to be a group of monkeys or fish or insects.

John 10:11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.

Jesus was entitled to say this since He was going to give up His life for our eternal salvation. So there remains the moving realization that we have been bought with a price, that we are really not our own and He is well within His rights to lay claim upon our lives.

By the way, it is no accident that God has chosen to call us sheep. The behavior of sheep and human beings is similar in many ways as will be seen in further studies. Our mob mentality, our fears and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, our perverse habits are all parallels of profound importance.

For that reason, I am going to draw many parallel lines to compare what humans do like sheep and we can learn what not to do and to do.

B. Psalm 23:1b I shall not want.

Actually the word "want" as used here, has a broader meaning than might at first be imagined. No doubt the main concept is that of not lacking – not deficient – in proper care.

The majority of people in the world are not content. That is the precise reason why we have all these crimes and wars, because they want something that are not belong to them. One of the greatest examples is the people of the entertainment industry – movies, music, etc. The famous ones make obscene amount of money for each movies and CDs they produce, yet they are not happy. Why? Because they don't know how to be content. They are restless, unsettled, covetous, greedy for more – wanting this and that, yet never really satisfied in spirit.

Contentment should be the hallmark of the man or woman who has put his or her trust in the hands of God.

C. Psalm 23:2a He makes me to lie down in green pastures

The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very make-up it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met:

1) Free from fear

I believe that it comes from their timidity they refuse to lie down unless they are free of all fear. Their shepherd must provide them the environment that would soothe their fear so that they can rest.

We are like that, too. That is why "Fear not," and "Do not be afraid" are two most frequent commands from the Lord to us in the Bible. In the Christian's life there is - nothing like Christ's presence to dispel the fear, the panic, the terror of the unknown.

In my opinion we live in the most uncertain time, especially the Democrats are controlling the Senate and Congress. Any hour can bring disaster, danger and distress from unknown areas of our lives. Generally it is the "unknown," and the "unexpected," that produce the greatest panic. We feel they endanger our tranquility.

I am surprised that there are not far more suicides of non-believers during this time of unknown. But those who are in Christ, we have hope in Him.

2) Free from friction

The second source of fear comes from tension, rivalry and cruel competition within the flock itself.

In every animal society there is established an order of dominance or status within the group. In a penful of chickens it is referred to as the "pecking order." Among sheep they call it "butting order."

Because of this rivalry, tension and competition for status and self-assertion, there is friction in a flock. The sheep cannot lie down and rest in contentment. Always they must stand up and defend their rights and contest the challenge of the intruder.

Ezekiel 34:20-22 'Therefore thus says the Lord God to them: "Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat and the lean sheep. 21 Because you have pushed with side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad, 22 therefore I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

However, when they see their shepherd, the sheep quickly forget their foolish rivalries and stopped their fighting. The shepherd's presence made all the difference in their behavior.

This is a graphic picture of the struggle for status in human society. There is the eternal competition "to keep up with the Joneses."

Even among churches or within the same congregation, the struggle for self-assertion and self-recognition goes on. Most of us fight to be "top sheep." We butt and quarrel and compete to "get ahead." And in the process people get hurt.

3) Free from pests

Sheep, especially in the summer, can be driven to absolute distraction by nasal flies and ticks. When tormented by these pests it is literally impossible for them to lie down and rest. A good shepherd will apply various types of insect repellents to his sheep.

The nasal flies lay eggs inside of sheep's nasal passage. After the eggs get hatched, the maggots will travel to the sheep's brain and eventually kill the sheep.

To prevent this, a good shepherd put medicated ointment inside of sheep's nose. It not only prevent nasal fly's eggs, but also the maggots reaching to its brain.

The Holy Spirit put His hedge of protection through the Word of God in each believer's heart that it would protect us from the enemy's attacks.

4) Free from hunger

Sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. They must be free from hunger.

John 6:35 And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. Jesus alone can fill our spiritual hunger, no one else.

D. Psalm 23:2b He leads me beside the still waters

When sheep are thirsty they become restless and set out in search of water to satisfy their thirst. If not led to the good supplies of clean, pure water, they will often end up drinking from the polluted pot holes where they pick up internal parasites.

In precisely the same manner Christ, our Good Shepherd, made it clear that thirsty souls of men and women can only be fully satisfied when they come to Him.

Dew is a clear, clean and pure source of water. The good shepherd makes sure that his sheep can be out and grazing on this dew-drenched vegetation. If necessary it will mean he himself has to rise early to be out with his flock.

In Christian life, I am sure you have noticed that the people who set aside time to be with the God Almighty through the Bible each day have more confidence in the power of God because they have learned to trust in Him. It is in the quiet hours of the day that they are led beside the quiet and still waters where they drink deeply the Word of God for the day.

E. Psalm 23:3a He restores my soul

I believe that David wrote this psalm in later in his years. I get the feeling that he remembered the time when prophet Nathan pointed his long index finger to him and yelled, "You are the man" for the adultery he committed with Bathsheba and having Uriah to be killed in the battle field. But he also remembered that sweet relationship with God was restored after his confession to the Lord.

Psalm 42:11 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.

There is an exact parallel to this in caring for sheep. 'Cast down' or 'downcast' come from old English shepherd's term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up again by itself.

Imagine a 'cast' sheep – lying on its back, its feet in the air, it flays away frantically struggling to stand up without success. It kinda reminds me jun bugs in the morning. they are on their back moving their legs, but cannot do a thing until I swept them away with a broom.

Vultures, wild dogs, coyotes and cougars all know that a cast sheep is easy prey and death is not far off. Not only the predators are enemies to sheep itself, but also their own weight and lack of blood circulation would eventually kill the cast sheep.

A good shepherd must help sheep to roll on its side. Before he does that, he has to rub each leg and to bring back the blood circulation and talk to the sheep with tenderness and rebuke, compassion and correction like Jesus would do to us.

Many people have the idea that when a child of God falls, God becomes disgusted, fed up and even furious with him. It is not so. As the Good Shepherd to us, He tenderly shows His compassion to us and gives us correction and rebuke so that we may learn from our own mistakes. However, that doesn't mean that there is no consequences.

There are two similar reasons why sheep and Christian are cast down:

1) A sheep is looking for a soft spot.

The sheep that choose the comfortable, soft rounded hollows in the ground in which to lie down very often become cast. In such a situation it is so easy to roll over on their backs.

In the Christian life there is great danger in always looking for the easy place, the cozy corner, the comfortable position where there is no hardship, no need for endurance, no demand upon self discipline. A great way to get backslidden.

2) A sheep simply has too much wool.

Often when the fleece becomes very long, and heavily matted with mud, manure, burrs and other debris, it is much easier for a sheep to become cast, literally weighed down with its own wool. In other words, it was too heavy.

Wool in Scripture depicts the old selfish life in the Christian. It is the outward expression of an inner attitude.

Here is where I find the clinging accumulation of things, of possessions, of worldly ideas beginning to weigh us down, drag us down, hold us down.

It is significant that no high priest was ever allowed to wear wool when he entered the Holy of Holies. This spoke of pride – and God could not tolerate it.

Whenever a shepherd finds that a sheep is being cast because it has too long and heavy a fleece, he soon must shear it clean and so prevents the danger of having the sheep lose her life. This was not always a pleasant process. Sheep do not really enjoy being sheared and it represents some hard work for the shepherd, but it must be done.

And similarly in dealing with our old selfish life, there will come a day when the Master must take us in hand and apply the sharp cutting edge of His Word to our lives. It may be an unpleasant business for a time. No doubt we'll struggle and resent it. We may even get a few cuts and wounds. But what a relief when it is all over.

F. Psalm 23:3b He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Sheep are notorious creatures of habit like human. Because of the behavior of sheep and their preference for certain favored grazing spots, those places become quickly barren and infested with parasites of all kinds. In a short time a whole flock can become infected with worms and scab. The final result is that land becomes wasted and sheep become thin and sickly.

The greatest single safeguard which a shepherd has in handling his flock is to keep them on the move. They must be shifted from pasture to pasture periodically.

As I mentioned before, there are tremendous characteristic similarities between human and sheep. We both are stiff necked and stubborn.

Proverbs 14:12 There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.

The path we should take is the way of Christ. Jesus declares, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes unto the Father but through Me." In other words, any other way we take will lead us to destruction.

When sheep continuously goes to wrong path and strays away from the shepherd, he would use staff to break one of its legs and treats with the utmost care. Then the shepherd would carry the sheep on his shoulder wherever they move. After it is healed completely, the shepherd would let go of the sheep. The sheep learns its lesson and stays close to the shepherd.

Like that our Good Shepherd would discipline us when we continuously walk away from Him. He lets us know that He is in charge and we are supposed to be submissive to Him.

G. APPLICATIONS

The Lord is my Shepherd.