

“THE GOOD SHEPHERD (#1): THE LORD OUR PROVIDER”

(Psalm 23:1-2a)

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[PROP NEEDED: Someone to read/portray “Shepherd Monologue #1”]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 8-2-09]

–I–

1. **[Traditional Service ONLY:]** Read NRSV Text: Psalm 23:1-2a and Pray.
2. **[Have someone read/portray “SHEPHERD MONOLOGUE #1”]**
3. In ancient times, sheep were a precious commodity of life, representing a primary source of wealth and livelihood.

B–Sheep provided food to eat, milk to drink, wool for the making of cloth, and even skins for clothing and tent-coverings.

C–They were often used as a form of currency and because of their significance in everyday life, were a central part of many ancient cultural religions.

D–By their very nature, sheep are affectionate, unaggressive, and relatively defenseless; but because of this, they’re in constant need of care and supervision.

4. Perhaps that’s why in the Bible we find more than 500 references to sheep, & nearly 100 references to shepherds.

A–Probably the most famous of these is Psalm 23, which many people know by heart.

B–And over the next four weeks we’ll be unpacking this beloved Psalm phrase by phrase, using various images to understand some of the characteristics of God, and how He can be for us even today “The Good Shepherd” described in the opening monologue.

–II–

5. Before we dive in, I want us to understand several things about the Psalm as a whole.

A–First, we’re not sure exactly *who* wrote it, because despite the fact that it’s called “*A Psalm of David*,” back then it was a common practice to use a famous person’s name as a way to have your work more widely read, and that could have happened here.¹

1–But *whoever* wrote it obviously wanted his readers to understand *God’s power* to deliver people from enemies and other perils, which makes it quite appropriate even for us today as we are facing the “enemies” of our own lives.

B–Another thing to notice is that despite its poetic language and beautiful pastoral scenery, it’s quite realistic in its portrayal of life.

1–On the one hand, we find romantic phrases like “*green pastures*,” “*still waters*,” and tools of security and comfort like the *rod, staff, table, oil, and cup*.

2–But it *also* contains phrases that present life as it *really is*, describing some of the struggles and pains of life that we *all* deal with from time to time: the “*valley of the shadow of death*,” “*evil*,” and “*enemies*” – so its relevant today.

C–And perhaps that’s why its words are so enduring –because in the midst of the harsh realities and struggles of life, this Psalm conveys the confident assurance that God is with us and *will help us* whatever it is that we have to face.

6. Now, each week I’ll be introducing a new word-image that describes God’s character, and how each phrase in that weeks’ scripture unpacks that image – today our focus is on how God is our PROVIDER.

–III–

7. And we begin with these words: “***THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD...***”

A–We’ve already heard in the opening monologue about the sacrificial nature of shepherds, so it’s only natural that in many ancient cultures (like Israel), shepherds became the very embodiment of sacrificial leadership.

1–So much so that Kings were often referred to as “Shepherds” of their people.²

2–And yet, in the ancient *Hebrew* culture, the Shepherd image was not only a metaphor for their *king*, but also for *GOD* and His relationship with Israel.³

B–So in one sense, we could say that this first phrase summarizes the entire Psalm (like a topic sentence), because the rest of its phrases in some sense merely restate and “flesh out” this first one, and give *examples of how* the Lord is like a “Shepherd”:

1–For example, to be a good shepherd implies that one’s sheep “*will not want*” for anything (Vs.1b).

2–It implies that you’ll provide food (“*green pastures*”), drink (“*still waters*”), guidance along “*right paths*,” protection & comfort by one’s “*rod and staff*,” and other blessings described in the image of the banquet feast in Verses 5-6.

3–You see, to say “*The Lord is my Shepherd*” implies that we’re trusting God to take care of all our needs, no matter how big or how small they might appear.

C–So the real question is: ...Is the Lord YOUR Shepherd today? Are you trusting Him to look after you? He *can* be, you know. He *wants* to be. And all we have to do is ask.

8. Let's look at the next phrase in the second half of Verse 1: **"...I SHALL NOT WANT."**

A-[Story of Misquoted Psalm 23:1]

After a Sunday School lesson one week, a little girl was heard quoting this first verse. And although she didn't get it quite right, she nonetheless did have the right idea. When she said, *"The Lord is my Shepherd; I've got all I want."*

1-Have you "got all you want", and are trusting God to take care of the rest? ⁴

2-Or are you instead always looking for more – never satisfied with what you have? Thinking you need that "one more cigarette"... "one more drink"... one more peek at something inappropriate on the internet... you have to share that one more bit of gossip... one more snack...one more relationship to be complete...and so on.

B-You see, this writer was expressing his complete dependence on God for provision, just as sheep are completely dependent on their shepherd.

1-In the book of Genesis, in Hebrew God is called "*Jehovah-Jireh*" = "*the Lord will provide.*" ⁵

2-And yet today, if we don't have a job or some tangible form of financial/material security,... don't we have a tendency to get all worried about "*where will the money come from for this or for that*"?

3-We worry, "*How will I ever get through this crisis?*" instead of believing and trusting that "*the Lord will provide.*" ⁶

C-Remember that words of Jesus in Matthew 6:25? "*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or drink, or wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ...Consider the birds of the air... [or] the lilies.... Are you not of more value than they? And if God takes care of them, will he not also take care of you?*"

D-"*The Lord is my Shepherd; I've got all I want.*" Have you allowed God to help you say that in *your* life?

9. So that brings us to our last phrase for today, found in the first half of Verse 2: **"HE MAKES ME TO LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES"**.

A-In his book [A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23](#), Phillip Keller wrote of the restlessness of sheep, and how they tend to be skiddish and resistant to lying down in a pasture unless they *know* that they are safe.

1-He points out that they're very much like us... restless and constantly moving from one place to the next; from one project to another; we have things to do, people to see, kids to deliver, appointments to keep, and so on.

2–And he says that because of the stress of being constantly on the go, we find it difficult to sleep, hard to relax, & impossible to sit still ... does that sound familiar?

B–The great early Christian theologian Augustine once wrote: *“You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are RESTLESS until they rest in you.”*

C–You see, today we need to learn better how to let go of our work and worry and give them to God, our Good Shepherd,...

1–...Because only when we rest in Him will we truly find the peace & contentment that our souls are seeking – only *then* can we *“lie down in green pastures.”*

2–Now, this verse is clear that it’s a *choice* – the Hebrew word we translate as *“make”* doesn’t mean *“force,”* but *“allow”* or *“enable”*.

3–So yes, God provides the “green pastures” (e.g., the things we need in life) – but it’s up to US to *choose* to “lie down” in them, instead of constantly looking for something and someone *else* to satisfy our needs.

–IV–

10. *“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures.”*

A–Is the Lord YOUR Shepherd this morning?

B–If so, you don’t need to worry about *“wanting”* for anything, because He can be trusted to take care of all our deepest needs.

C–And that whatever cares and worries we *do* have, if we’ll give them to God, then He’ll give us peace of mind and heart that enable us to *“lie down in green pastures,”* because He is our PROVIDER.

11. [PRAY: *God, we pray today to those here today whose hearts are “restless” because they’ve never “rested” in you, and for those who’ve gotten up from their “rest” and need to do it again. There are those among us who’ve tried to find “green pastures” on their own, and haven’t been able to do it. Help them to invite you into their hearts, so that you can lead them to the true “green pastures” that only you can provide. Help us all to trust in you to meet ALL our needs in life: spiritual, physical, financial, emotional, and relational, and to truly trust you to be the Lord our Provider.*]

12. [CLOSING SONG: (Traditional Service: UMH#130 “God Will Take Care of You”)]

SHEPHERD MONOLOGUE #1

“I am a shepherd. I tend sheep for a living in the outer part of Israel. Yes, this profession is still alive and well. Let me tell you what it is like to be a shepherd. Hard! That’s what it is! My flock will not graze without me. I am never off duty. There’s not a lot of grass where we live, so my sheep tend to wander.

We aren’t wealthy, so we don’t have big ‘ol fancy walls protecting my flock so I must watch them constantly! Now on either side of this narrow ridge where we graze there’s a steep drop off that leads to the rocky desert below. Sheep are not very smart you know...so they tend to stray away from the group and get lost.

As if that wasn’t dangerous enough I have to guard the sheep from wild animals...especially those pesky wolves! Then there’s the constant threat of robbers always trying to steal my sheep! But you know, not even their owner loves these sheep more than I do. They are definitely worthy the endless hours of watching and the courage to overcome the risks of this job. Nope, nothing could ever make me not love my sheep.”

[-Modified from commentary about first-century shepherds by scholar
William Barclay in The Gospel of John, Volume 2, pp. 61-62]

ENDNOTES:

1. Some believe that the Psalm was written by the young David as he was on the run from King Saul, while others believe it was written for use by the people or the King of Israel in a time of national crisis. Still others believe it was written by or for someone who had been granted asylum in the Jerusalem Temple because of some accident, such as manslaughter or other unintentional violence.
2. Read, for example, Ezekiel 34.
3. You’ll remember that later in the New Testament (John 10), Jesus--the SON of God--is also described as the “*GOOD Shepherd*.”
4. I once heard the question phrased this way: “*Has Jesus been enough for you today or this week? Or are you thinking you need something else?*”
5. Read Genesis 22:13-14.
6. God is not here to necessarily meet all of our *wants*, but certainly all of our *needs*.