

Psalm 23 (Part 1)

A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23

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Matthew 4: 4 But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

I believe this statement is given in order to reinforce the understanding of our utter dependence on God. Not only are we dependent upon Him for the constant steadfast working of the laws in the natural world that causes the food to come out of the ground so we can continue to eat, but Jesus is showing that there is an area of life in which we are utterly dependent upon God but are less likely to pay attention to.

God's Word contains a great deal of teaching, counsel, and advice within the framework of histories, biographies, poetry, psalms, proverbs, and law, and it is frequently given with the vivid use of metaphors. But in many cases, these metaphors are the kind of which we are no longer familiar.

People who count such things say that there are fifty-three different animals that are mentioned in Scripture—such as the ant, the adder, the ape, camel, badger, chameleon, deer, dog, elephant, hornet, hippo, sheep (and on and on it goes). Why does God speak so frequently about animals? Is there something we can learn from them? Indeed, I believe there is very much we can learn from animals. If you will turn to Job 12: 7, we will continue to lay the foundation for this series. In Job 12, Job is answering the argument of Zophar—an argument that concluded seven or eight verses previously.

Job 12:7-9 But now ask the beasts, and they will teach you; and the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you; and the fish of the sea will explain to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?

We are aware that animals have many purposes. God has created within them certain characteristics of His personality (or maybe of our personality—I do not want to leave that out) and they are given in order that we might study into them, reflect upon them, emulate them, or maybe to eliminate those characteristics from our personality.

But the teaching neither begins nor ends with animals. God has invested His entire creation with the power to teach. Turn with me to Psalm 19: 1-4 and notice what David has to say in regard to this principle in which we are talking, that is, that God has invested within His creation a power to teach. You and I are very severely limited in regard to this because we live

surrounded by things that men have made—concrete, steel, glass, and asphalt. And we see automobiles, and telephones, television, carpets, and windows and all kinds of things of that nature. Yet it is very likely that our range of thinking in terms of being taught by the things that man has made is very limited indeed.

How much more limited is it in terms of teaching that God gives us in His creation, when we are not even thinking about His creation and what it has to teach us? There was a time when men had time to reflect on these things. Out of these reflections, out of these meditations came things like the 19th Psalm, where it says:

Psalm 19:1 The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.

Can you just see David out there one night, tending his flock, and looking up at the starry mass that is up in the sky, and seeing the shadowy outlines of the hills in the distance, and looking at the moon reflecting the power of the light of the sun, and thinking about what an *awesome* Mind it took to create all these things? It says:

Psalm 19:2-4 Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. [He means that this teaching is going on day after day after day. It is out there for you and for me to meditate on.] There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. [It does not matter if you are in Thailand, China, Russia, or America; the same sun is up there, the same moon, and the same Creator, the same Mind made all of those things.] Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

Is he not saying, without saying it directly in this place, that there are no people anywhere who can say, honestly, that there is no God, there is no Creator? Cannot everybody come to the place of saying how noble is the Mind that has made this; how vast is His thinking; how majestic His artistry; how grand His power is; what depth of understanding that Mind has that put this all together and made it possible for me to have life? That kind of teaching is everywhere in God's creation! Let us go to Romans where the apostle Paul wrote:

Romans 1:18-19 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them [or "to them" as the margin says], for God has shown it to them.

Where? By what means? What has been the mechanism? What is the means of teaching that God has shown Himself to mankind?

Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible

attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

What Job, David, and the apostle Paul are saying is that there is deliberate instruction in the world around us so that we are without excuse if we say that we have no models or examples or we have no way of knowing what God is like, or what He wants us to have (or, to be) in the way of attitude or conduct.

Brethren, do we ever think about these things? I think we do from time to time. We might be studying through the Proverbs, and we see something about an ant; and we reflect upon the ant. We are still somewhat familiar with what we consider to be a troublesome pest that is running in our sugar bowls or whatever, inside of our houses. We try to get rid of them. But are there some things we can learn from an ant that might be very valuable for salvation? Yes, there is; and God writes about it. He had His prophets and His priests write about those things.

In addition to how there is obvious instruction in the world around us of God, what He is like, and what His purpose is, there are (in God's Word) quite a number of man/animal parallels. When we were going through the study of Abraham we came across one, did we not? And I spent a lot of time on it.

We talked about Ishmael, whom God calls a wild ass of a man. You can learn a great deal about Ishmael's personality by studying what a wild ass is like. Does not God, in the book of Daniel, call Nebuchadnezzar a great eagle? If you study an eagle, you have some of the mind of that great personality, Nebuchadnezzar. You think of an eagle, and the majesty and the swiftness and power that it represents—the beauty and the seeming wisdom it has. It is able to see everything from a height. He must have been a great man, a great ruler.

How about Alexander the Great? He is called (in the book of Daniel) a he-goat, charging into great flocks and herds of people, butting them aside, almost mercilessly left and right, and taking command of everything. That is what a goat does. He is in charge, and on he goes.

Undoubtedly, you are most familiar with this next one, which says:

I Peter 2:25 For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

The common one of these comparisons to you and me is that God compares His church—His people—to sheep.

How much do you know about sheep? Those of you who have lived in LA, how much do you know about sheep? Probably not very much. You may not even understand your dog very well. But sheep—I guarantee you do not know anything about. I know you have pictures in your mind because you have heard things about sheep in the past. Maybe those things you have heard are basically true. I do not think that you spend much time studying about sheep either. It is not a natural inclination for somebody born and bred in Southern California to study sheep. It is not on the top of your list, and you are not going to do it.

Well, I did have sheep. My wife and I and our next-door neighbor (who was also our landlord) had sheep together. It was his idea. I did not have any inclination to study sheep either. But he knew we were really scraping by on the money. (This is when we were just coming into the church, back in 1960 and 1961.) He said to me, "Johnny, I know a way the two of us can save some money. We will get a couple of lambs, when they are real young. We will buy them cheap and take care of them on the ground we have. When they grow up we will slaughter them and have the meat."

That sounded like a pretty good idea to me. I can say that at the time I did not really learn a great deal about sheep, because I was not thinking about studying sheep even though I was taking care of a small number of them. There were only five. That is all the pasture we had to take care of them. In addition to that, I read a book two or three or four different times that I want to recommend to you. It is by a man named Philip Keller, and entitled *A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23*.

Between the two of them (my own experience plus the book), I think I have at least enough knowledge about sheep—their inclinations and their personality—and little bit about shepherding to teach you, maybe a great deal more than you already know.

The Bible is a collection of books that is written by, for the most part, what you and I would call "blue-collar people"—people who were involved in the common occupations of their day. I do not mean in anyway that, because they were blue-collar, they were unintelligent or fearful and timid men in any way. But they drew upon the background of their experiences, and God allowed their idioms and metaphors to be put into the Bible.

Moses was a shepherd for forty years. He tended the flocks of Jethro. Everybody knows that David was a shepherd. Amos was probably not a shepherd—the text seems to indicate that he was more a breeder of sheep. There would be some shepherding involved in that, but he described himself as being a breeder of sheep and a tender of the sycamore tree. Peter, Andrew, James, and John herded fish into nets. But, the terminology they used is largely in rural language. That is fine for someone who understands rural idioms and rural metaphors. But if you were raised in Los Angeles, there is a chance you do not understand what they were getting at.

I think that you will agree that God's Word and the instruction that is contained within it—very large portions of the instruction that is contained within it—is bound up in the natural world. David looked at the heavens and wrote Psalm 19—that kind of thing. So we have instruction that comes from shepherds and fishermen, and it is an indisputable good method of teaching if you understand what they are talking about.

How many of you have ever owned some sheep? How many of you have ever been a shepherd? I cannot really say that I was a shepherd in the classical sense of the word. I just had sheep, and we had a pasture; and we learned something from them. I have 98% of the congregation here who knows nothing about sheep. I could tell you anything, practically. I will not do that though. It is an area that we need to study into.

Let us go back to Psalm 100: 3. If you think of God's Word, there are two main relationships He

stresses: that which He has with us, and we with Him. The one is more obvious than the other because, every time you pray, you say, "Our Father."

The one relationship everybody is familiar with is a family relationship. And though we might not know all of the ramifications of a family relationship, all of us are somewhat familiar with it. So that is the most common means of teaching that comes from God regarding our relationship to Him. It is a family relationship. He is our Father; we are begotten by Him; we are in the womb of our Mother.

The second most common one is the one that involves sheep.

Psalm 100:3 Know that the Lord, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

Psalm 95:3-7 For the Lord is the great God, and the great King above all gods. In His hand are the deep places of the earth; the heights of the hills are His also. The sea is His, for He made it; and His hands formed the dry land. [There you have a foundation of Whom this One is, with Whom we have this relation.] Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.

That idiom, "of His hand," means "under His care." The hand does the work; the hand is above the sheep; so the idiom arises that means that we are under His care.

Whether you realize it or not, that is the theme of the 23rd Psalm—that we are under His care. I want you to hold that in the back of your mind as we begin Psalm 23. We are not going to get very far through it this day; but we will be going back to it again and again, to pick up some of the information that is there.

Psalm 23:1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures.

This was written by David—who was intimately acquainted with shepherding and sheep, and who was called "the shepherd king." What we are finding out in verse 1 is that David the shepherd had a Shepherd. YHVH, the God of the Old Testament, was David's Shepherd.

I want you to place the emphasis on verse 1, from word to word; and from that, we are going to lay the foundation for explaining why the shepherd, David, said what he did in Psalm 23. Verse 1 lays the foundation from which the rest of the psalm is built.

Under whose hand do you live? "The Lord, he is *my* shepherd!" You immediately have to begin to contrast who is your Boss? Who is your Lord? Who is your Master? Is it the Lord, or is it Baal? Is it Satan? Is it this world? To whom are you looking for your care? "The Lord," David says, "is my Shepherd."

You can begin to see that this psalm is written from the standpoint of the sheep. It is the sheep

that is doing the speaking. If you can get the picture, humanly, of a sheep looking across the fence at sheep who are under the care of someone else and our sheep (David; you, and me) is bragging to the other sheep that is across the fence, "Well, I see the kind of circumstances you live in. I see that your pasturage is all brown and that you do not have good water to drink. I see that your master is one that beats you or does not take care of you. But, buddy, my shepherd is the Lord!"

What are the credentials of the Lord by which the sheep would be moved to brag about who its boss is, who its master is, who is taking care of him? What kind of a shepherd is our Shepherd? You and I, we really have something going for us *if* the Lord is truly our Shepherd.

Turn back to Colossians 1:15, where our Shepherd is described as:

Colossians 1:15-20 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And he is before all things [meaning in front of, having preeminence], and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell [our Boss, our Master has all the fullness], and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

When David wrote what he did, it was with a strong sense of pride. He was literally boasting, "Look who my Boss is. Look who my Manager is, my Owner is." He said this because David understood that, of all livestock, a sheep requires the most care. David knew from first hand experience that the well being of the sheep depends on the type of man who owned him.

Our Shepherd is the Creator. Think about that for just a second. David mentioned the great view that was presented before his eyes of the heavens—seeing that mass of stars that are twinkling away in the sky. From what I understand, no matter where one stands on earth on the clearest night, with the unaided, naked eye, the most stars that we can see is somewhere around 6,000. Yet we know, from the research of astronomers, that there are multibillions of stars out there, maybe even billions of galaxies and each one containing billions of stars.

Our sun is a star; and it is one of the smaller stars, insignificant by comparison to some of the stars out there. Betelgeuse is so huge that it can contain the entire solar system that encompasses the earth—the sun, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, and all the way out to Pluto. Betelgeuse can contain the whole thing inside of it. The earth is so insignificant, that if we would go out to the next nearest star to us, which is Alpha Centauri, and point back the most powerful telescope that we have, the earth could not even be seen.

Now you are living on this earth, which to you right now looks so vast and awesome. But

Imagine what a tiny speck you are in this universe compared to the earth, compared to the sun, compared to the Milky Way Galaxy, compared to the billions of galaxies there are. Yet you are the apple of God's eye! That is awesome!

That is why David could brag, "The Lord is my Shepherd." He knew that, despite this massive creation God is managing, God was aware of him. I do not know whether you realize it, but when Jesus said that even the sparrow does not fall without God being aware of it, He also said that not a sparrow falls without His will! You talk about careful management. You talk about being aware of what is going on. Yet we worry.

John 10:11-13 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and *does not care* about the sheep."

But our Shepherd cares! You are not only the focus of His attention; *he laid down his life for you*. Not just the mass of us here, but for you and me as an individual. He deliberately chose you and me to be an object of His attention. He laid His life down for us; and we, as a result of that, have come under His ownership. He has bought us with a price.

With a domesticated sheep, everything depends on the shepherd's care. I think you can see in these verses the unspoken comparison (the parallel) that is being made between Jesus Christ and Satan the devil; between the church and the world.

Shepherding involves a very protective attitude and sacrificial concern of the shepherd for the sheep. When it says he lays down his life, it is implying a voluntary sacrifice. The shepherd does not have to stay and face the lion and the bear, but he voluntarily does it. He could easily reconcile and justify and say, "Well, what is a few sheep? I can afford one, because I want to escape with my life. Is not my life more valuable than a sheep's?" Certainly, but Jesus Christ did not think that way.

The good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep. When the predator shows up that is threatening the destruction of the sheep, the hireling runs away, but the shepherd lays down his life. To him the safety of the sheep is more important than his own life. The hireling does not give courageous leadership and he will not endanger himself for them because his main concern is his pay.

Why do you think the good Shepherd lays down His life? Because He knows you! It is a personal thing with Him. You are not just a number; you are a personality and you have character. You have hopes, and you have dreams, and you have discouragements, and you have strengths, and you have weaknesses. To Him—there is a relationship of trust and intimacy between you and Him; and He will not break faith with the sheep that are under His care because He knows them, and He loves each one of them individually.

We are beginning to see more of a picture of our Shepherd. He is not only the Creator who has

this awesome power. He is also a Shepherd that has majestic concern and care for His sheep.

Think of Jesus Christ. Was there ever a human being that has ever had greater impact on humanity than He? I think not. He is the most balanced human being who ever lived. He bore Himself with great dignity and assurance while He was on earth; though He was not born with any special advantage, and indeed was born in rather mean circumstances.

Yet, He never offered that as an excuse. He set the highest standards that have ever been lived by anybody on the face of this earth. He lived up to them Himself. He showed that He was a man of gentle and tender concern to sinners and the people who recognized themselves as such. But He was as stern as steel with the phonies—the hypocrites; those who were putting on a show; those who had arrogance and a great deal of self-assertiveness. He was a terror to the hypocrites. That is the kind of tender concern that He has for you and me.

You have to begin to ask yourself, "Do you really belong to Him?" Are you willing to brag that the Lord is your shepherd; that your Lord, indeed, has the characteristics that are described in this Book; one of awesome power, and yet tender and never ending concern for you as an individual; that you are intimate with Him and you trust that He is going to follow through with that awesome power, that awesome mind, and that loving character?

Turn to Exodus 21, because there is a fitting description of someone who recognizes that they have been bought with a price and they recognize that they have come under the care of a loving owner. There was something that God provided for individuals who met certain requirements, and it is described here in a simple ceremony that is given in Exodus 21. I think it is so interesting where this appears. It appears right after the listing of the Ten Commandments. Think about that.

Exodus 21:1-2 "Now these are the judgments which you shall set before them: If you buy a Hebrew servant . . .

You have been bought with a price, brethren; and you have become a spiritual Jew regardless of your ethnic background. You are now a spiritual Jew. You are a Hebrew. But you have been a slave.

Exodus 21:3-6 "If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master has given him a wife, and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself. But if the servant plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever."

The place where this ceremony took place was at the doorpost. It was symbolic of a slave being attached to a house (meaning family, meaning kingdom). As you can see, the ear was involved

as that part that was attached to the house. Spiritually, brethren, being attached to the house—to the Family, to the Kingdom of God—has something to do with the ear. It has something to do with hearing. And faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. How you hear the Word of God is going to determine how deeply attached you are to the house, because the just live by faith and faith comes by hearing. It is not a perfect analogy, but it is something to be aware of.

Horse and cattlemen brand their stock, do they not? They get a hot iron and they singe the hide. You cannot do that with a sheep because the wool is so thick. Besides that, you will ruin the wool that is there as well. But a sheep man has to put a distinctive mark on his sheep as well so that, at least visually, someone can differentiate them from someone else's.

This is important, because in areas where pasturage is crowded, there will many times be two, three, four, and five different flocks that are in the same field. Sheep all look pretty much alike, even to shepherds, although there may be something distinctive. But there is a way a shepherd can tell his sheep from others visually. He takes a sharp knife, and he lays the sheep head down on a block of wood, bends it over, spreads the ear out; and he puts his brand in the sheep's ear (usually on the outside so it can be seen).

Have you been branded by God's Word? Do you have God's mark in your mind because His Word has come into your ears, and you are hearing it with understanding and with discernment?

There is an interesting thing as I mentioned before about sheep. Sheep cannot talk. The shepherd can put a mark on the sheep's ear, but sheep can do something very well. Turn with me to John 10 again. This is the way God's sheep will be as well.

John 10:3-4 "To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice."

The shepherd has to put a mark on the sheep, but the sheep has the mark in his mind. He recognizes his master's voice. This is one of the things I learned with the sheep, because my landlord and I shared the responsibility of feeding the sheep in the morning. They had reasonably good pasture to forage in, but we made sure that every morning we fed them a mixture of really good grains—corn, oats, we mixed molasses within it, put a little bit of salt within it as well. They had a very nice mixture. Those sheep liked that. They would give up grass any day for the fodder we gave them in the morning.

All I had to do was walk out of the house, walk out to the pasture, regardless of where they were and say, "Come on in." They came running regardless. They knew my voice. They knew my landlord's voice, too. They differentiated between the two of them. They understood the time of the day, they knew the voices; and, when we called out they came running.

We had another signal too and sometimes I would test them just to see whether or not they would come without my calling. All I had to do was rattle the pan with a spoon. That disappointed me a little bit, because it was not me they were coming for, it was the food. They

did not like me. They liked the food I was giving them.

For you and me, or for someone having sheep like we had, that did not make too much difference because we only had one flock. As I mentioned before, sometimes in places where it is crowded, like in the Middle East, where there is not a great deal of pasturage for them to forage around in, all the shepherds have to share the pasturage that is available to them. There will be hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of sheep, each one belonging to a different flock. In a day's time, they all get mixed together. All a shepherd has to do is to give his familiar call, whatever it happens to be. All he has to do is to give his sheep a command and the flocks begins to shake and shimmer and flutter, and his sheep stand up and separate themselves away—and they come toward the voice.

That is what Jesus is talking about here. His sheep hear His voice. His sheep will come when they are called. They will separate themselves from the world—from Satan's sheep—and they will head toward the voice that they recognize (if they are hearing, if they have that mark within them).

What we are beginning to see here is that "The Lord is my shepherd," shows two things: It shows that the shepherd is the personification of tender care and watchfulness. It is another way of saying there is a loyalty and devotion of intense feeling that comes from the top down. The Shepherd will provide.

It ought to breathe confidence into you and me that we have a Shepherd that is like this, who feels a loyalty to you and me that (I am sure) we are incapable of feeling toward Him. We just do not have the resources to be able to do it. But certainly I think that He deserves at least a great deal of the measure of the loyalty that He has toward us, that we ought to be able to give toward Him.

God shows in Ezekiel 9: 4, where He was prophesying of the destruction of Jerusalem, that those who sighed and cried for all the abominations that were going on around them, those who were aware of the standards of our Shepherd and had nothing but compassion, pain, and empathy for what was going on around them, because they heard their Shepherd's voice—those are the ones that God put a mark on.

Incidentally, the Hebrew that is used there indicated that there was an X—what we would call the Hebrew equivalent of an X—put on their forehead (like X marks the spot). They had the same kind of idiom that we have, only they did not use an X, but the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Now, a couple of serious questions that we need to ask ourselves: Do I really belong to Him? That is a question that only you can answer. Do I really belong to Him? Do I really recognize His right to me? Do I respond to His authority? Do I acknowledge His ownership? Do I find freedom and fulfillment in this arrangement between Him and me? Do I have a deep sense of purpose of mission and direction as a result of this relationship? There is a warning that we will get to in a little bit, that the Shepherd occasionally has to cull from His flock those who do not respond to His leadership.

Back in Psalm 23, it says, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Remember that this

psalm is written from the perspective of the sheep. What we have here from the sheep is a statement of contentment. The word "want" has the general sense of not lacking. "I will not lack." We might refine that definition a little bit further to mean "there will be no gnawing desire within me to have more."

We need to refine this definition even further by thinking of the author of this psalm, who was David. Was there ever a time in David's life when he lacked? Was there ever a time when David went hungry? Was there ever a time when David was living in privation, running for his life, hiding in caves, gathering around him the men who were most loyal to him, fleeing for his life from Saul, from Absalom, or maybe others that he had in some way offended?

David was often in privation, in poverty, for quite a number of years of his life. He lived in hardship. I think that the psalms show very clearly that he was a man frequently in anguish of spirit. Therefore, I think it is absurd—we would be absolutely wrong—to come to the conclusion that David is saying that anyone who is under the care of our Shepherd, the Lord, is never going to be in privation, fear, or anguish of spirit. He must mean something else.

In John 16: 33, when Jesus is speaking to His disciples just prior to His death, He said:

John 16:33 "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

We are going to have trouble. We are going to have pressure. Those things mean privation, fear, and anguish of spirit. There are some who mistakenly think that material prosperity is a significant mark of God's blessing. Indeed, there is a possibility that God may be blessing; but it is not something that we can take as an absolute.

For example, in Revelation 3: 17, in the address that God gives to the Laodicean He says:

Revelation 3:17 "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked."

It is pretty obvious that these people are not being blessed by God, and yet there is a great deal of material wealth because they are saying, "I am rich and increased with goods;" and God says, "Yes, but..."

You might also remember what God said to the rich young ruler. He said, "There is one thing you yet lack. I think what you ought to do is sell everything you have and give it to the poor." Give away wealth? That is a blessing?

David could not possibly mean that one who is owned by Christ would never have privation or would never lack materially. What he is saying (remember the psalm) is the sheep would never lack the most expert care and management that are available in the universe.

Remember I told you that of all livestock, sheep require the most care. Their well being is

almost entirely dependent on their master. They easily fall prey to dogs, cougars, and rustlers. They sometimes blunder from place to place in search of water, grass, or salt. They are subject to many diseases, parasites, and insects. If they are going to prosper, it is going to be because they have the best of care.

I think you will understand (maybe it is something that is inherent in what we are talking about) that analogies such as this only go so far, because you and I are human beings. We are thinking. An animal, of course, is not. On some occasions there are responses required from the human sheep that one would not get from an animal. When I say response, I am talking about responsibility that must be on our part if this cooperative effort between our Shepherd and us is going to work. We have to understand that all the while this cooperative effort is going on, we are going to get the most expert care available.

Our part is to work to supply something else. Turn with me to Philippians 4. This has something to do with hearing and understanding; but it is something that each and every one of us is capable of, because God will give us the resources to be able to do this.

Philippians 4:11-13 Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. [That is what we are talking about here.] I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

We are going to get the best of care, guidance, and management; but we have to respond. We have to hear the Word of God. We have to allow faith to build. We have to put faith to work in our lives. If we are indeed His slaves, if we have been anchored to the doorpost, if we are part of the house, if we are hearing—then we are going to do our part.

Our part is to understand we are going to get the best of care. Our part is going to be to supply the contentment with what He supplies, and realize that the state we are in has something to do with His care and management. He is building something. He is a creator. He is bringing us toward an end.

Many times we get agitated and upset because we begin to feel He is on our case. "He does not really care. He is after me. All He wants to do is punish." No, we need to get rid of that thought. Yes, He may be putting us through the paces; but it has a positive motivation behind it. He is trying to produce something, and the pressure of His creative efforts certainly brings to bear upon us something that we may not want to go through. There may be privation, loss of reputation, not much to eat, whatever. But He is aware and He is guiding us toward an end. We have to learn to work within the framework of what He has provided. Contentment ought to be a hallmark of those who are hearing—His sheep.

We have a lot going against us. We live in a very, very insecure, unsettled, unstable world where things move at a frantic pace; and there are all kinds of pressures coming in against us. We are surrounded on every side by an attitude that is covetous and greedy, where many

people are unsettled in spirit. There is a reason why we are unsettled and discontent. It is part of the tenor of this age. But it is something that has to be overcome.

I Peter 5:6-7 Therefore [we are to] humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God [remember that we are the sheep of His hand], that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, *for He cares for you.*

That is what our Shepherd's responsibility is and He will do it. He *cares*. The word connotes two things at the same time. It connotes an emotion, affection, and a concern. It also connotes to us providence in the sense of supplying. He takes care, and He does those things, and He will supply.

Contentment has its foundation in the knowledge of, in the belief of, the One whose care we are under. Again, it is a spin off, an application, of faith.

Hebrews 13:5-6 Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say: "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

Brethren, to our Shepherd, no trouble is too great in His care and concern for you and me. He has already shown He will go to the limit. He has died for us! Anything else compared to that is easy for Him. It is not too much. He has already gone the limit and He does not have to do that anymore. He will provide. He will take care.

Back again to the sheep for just a minute. The first thing any real shepherd does on arising in the morning is to look over the state of his flock. One by one, he casts his eyes over them to see if they are all there. The next thing he does is examine each one a little more carefully to see if they were harmed in any way during the night. Maybe one has fallen ill as a result of a parasite, or something of that nature. He has to examine each one.

Do you think our Shepherd is any different; that He is not taking care of His flock; that you are not of individual concern to Him? Does He not say, "I have counted every hair on your head?" I will tell you, that is better than any shepherd does with his sheep.

He knows the state of His flock, and He is emotionally attached to you. He knows what you need. And there are times, believe it or not, when a sheep has to be put on a diet. (I will get to that later.)

We are told in Psalm 121:4-5, that our Shepherd never sleeps! His eyes are always open. Despite assurances like this, all of us have a measure of restlessness. Sometimes we think we could do better in another pasture. Most of us put that down, and we become content with what we have once again. But that state of restlessness is there nonetheless. It has to be kept under control, because there is an awful lot out there in the world that is very attractive.

There are some sheep that cannot resist (I am talking about real sheep now). In our little flock

of 5 sheep, we had one like that. What they do is they get over against the fence and they "worry the fence"—rubbing against, leaning against, trying at a variety of places to find a place that they can break out of the pasture that they are in and get into another one.

Mr. Keller tells in his book of one that was particularly interesting—a ewe that he called Mrs. Gadabout. His pasture was on the seashore. He put the fence right out on the sand, on the shore, right out into the surf so the sheep could come down to the ocean. He thought they could not get around it and into the next pasture. (The fence was dividing his from another fellows.)

But Mrs. Gadabout, somehow or another, found out that she could get around that fence at low tide. She kept getting out, night after night; and he would have to go get her. He said from his point of view there was no reason for her to go do those things because his pasture was nice and green and the guy's next door was terribly brown. It was not a matter of quality. It was simply something that was ingrained in the personality of this sheep—that she wanted greener pastures. The way it looked to her, it was always across the other side of the fence.

He said that this was one of the best ewes he had ever owned. She was big, sturdy, strong, and never got sick. She had lambs that were prizes to behold. Then he found out that she was teaching her lambs how to get around at low tide too. He decided that the only thing he could do was to put her to death, because eventually she would probably teach the whole flock how to escape. He said one morning, despite his feelings of affection for this very fine animal; he took out the killing knife and cut her throat. It was better to put her to death than it was to have her teaching the whole flock how to escape.

I mentioned that we had one of these in our little flock. Sure enough, she found a little place in the fence where she could get through. The first time she found it was on the Sabbath. We had services in the afternoon in Pittsburgh. We were sitting there in the morning, contentedly studying or whatever; and the lady down the road from us (we lived out in a rural area) from whom we bought our milk—Mrs. Pearson—called us and said, "Mr. Ritenbaugh, your sheep are down in our woods."

Well, what am I going to do? Since it was the Sabbath, the first thing I had to decide was if I would be breaking the Sabbath if I went after my sheep. I decided no, that it was good that I should go get my sheep and try to herd them back into the pasture. Then I thought I better look to see where they got out, because if I put them back in, they were going to get right back out. So before I went to get them, I found the place where they got out; and it was right at the end of the pasture. They had found a place where they worried the wire enough that they pushed their way through to where there was a steep embankment, down onto a railroad track. They slid down the embankment, got on the railroad track, and they started to follow the railroad track, eating contentedly as they went along.

Well, when I found out that they were probably on the railroad track, I began to worry about a train coming along. So I followed the railroad. Sure enough, they were down in the woods, near Mrs. Pearson's house, munching away contentedly.

Well, I am no shepherd. How am I going to get those sheep back to our pasture? A thought came to mind—I remembered about feeding. I thought that if I just talked to them maybe they

would gather around me.

I walked in a wide circle to get behind them, came in on them, and started talking to them. Believe it or not—and it was amazing to me—they started moving ahead of me in the same direction I was going. They came out of the woods, got up on the railroad track, and got back to the hole in the fence.

Now, how in the world was I ever going to get those sheep up that steep embankment, through that tiny little hole in the fence; and here it is the Sabbath. I got the one who looked to be the leader. I grabbed her by the neck (a big handful of wool) and I grabbed her by the rump (another big handful of wool) and I went up the side of the hill with that one. I got her nose through the hole in the fence and the others just followed meekly behind.

I fixed the hole in the fence so they could not get back out, but it was a valuable lesson. If you have a leader like that who is going to lead people astray, something has to be done. I did not have to kill her, but I saw that thing we call "the sheep instinct" so clearly—their desire to follow. Whether it was my voice or whether it was the chief ewe, they were willing to follow. They followed right in the footsteps of the one who was setting the pace.

No man can serve two masters. God tells us that in Matthew 6:24. Something has to be done. Sometimes some, despite all, have to be culled from the flock.

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

For those of you who are unfamiliar with sheep, you may not think very much of that statement. A sheep can be made to lie down. They will listen to their master's voice and they will lie down if he commands it. However, on their own, they will not lie down unless four conditions are met:

1. They have to be free of fear. There is no animal more timid than a sheep. It does not take very much to put fear in them.
2. They will not lie down unless they are free from friction within the flock, the herd, socially.
3. They must be free of pests—bugs, insects. A horse has a big, long tail and they can swish flies away. A sheep does not have anything to defend itself from any insects.
4. They will not lie down if they are hungry.

So we have fear, tension within the flock, aggravation from irritating things, and hunger. The reason these are important is because a stockman, a shepherd, is usually herding his sheep in order to make money. A lot of his money is made on two things: the quality of the wool and the weight of the sheep, if he is herding them for their meat.

If a sheep is in fear, if there is tension, if there is aggravation, or if there is hunger, they do not do well. They will not put on weight because, like you and me, they are animals that are subject to a great deal of stress. When you are under stress, you lose weight. That is, unless you are one of those people who eat to cover their stress; and only human beings do that. Animals do not. They will lose weight.

As they lose weight because of poor nutrition, because of the stress-filled situation, the wool becomes a poorer and poorer quality. So it is to the shepherd's advantage, in every way, that he makes sure that his flock is contented—that there is no fear, no aggravation, no tension, there is no hunger.

A sheep is so timid that a rabbit bounding from a patch somewhere because it has been frightened will stampede a whole flock. One sheep takes off; and then they all take off, because of that sheep instinct. They all stampede. They do not bother to look and say, "Hey, what was it that scared you?" They just go, and they might just run off the edge of a cliff. It is a very serious business. The shepherd always has to be on the ball with sheep, when he is in an area that is somewhat dangerous, that something does not frighten them.

Mr. Keller told of a story of some lady, who came out to visit him, who had a Pekingese pup. I think a Pekingese pup is about eight inches long. This pup fell out of the car and came up yipping. He ran across the driveway, across the yard, and toward the field; and Mr. Keller's 200 sheep took off stampeding across the pasture from a little Pekingese. It does not take very much to scare a sheep.

What about tension? Humans, socially, have what we call a pecking order. That term came from chickens. Chickens have a pecking order. With cattle there is a horning order. With sheep there is a butting order.

Sheep butt one another in order to establish themselves socially within the flock. Usually what occurs is there will be one ewe that will be the queen ewe, the "chief butt;" and she establishes herself as the one who is in charge. She is, very frequently, asserting her position by butting other sheep to make sure they understand who she is. She feels the necessity of doing this. It is something that is instinctive within sheep to do this. It is not an evil thing. They just establish the perimeters of their social order in order to make sure everybody in the flock knows her position.

I say everybody because it begins with the one ewe, and it goes right on down. Every ewe in the flock has its place. Most of them are more or less equal; but each one knows its area, its place.

There is this constant drive within them to make sure others know where their place is. It is not at all uncommon for them to arch their back and neck and go butting heads. They are saying in effect, "Get out of my way, buddy. I want that pasture that you are on right now." If that ewe does not move out of the way, then the one who is challenging butts her.

You can understand the application in a congregation—that if there are those who are butting in order to assert their prominence within a congregation, they are going to do what happens in a flock. They are going to cause a great deal of tension.

There is a very interesting section in Ezekiel 34—practically the whole chapter is devoted to this illustration. The lesson, the prophecy that is given there is against the shepherds of Israel. He means the kings, princes, and the religious leaders as well. God describes the way they act within the flock in the same way I have just described here—butting and pushing people out of the way. He even uses the term, "giving them the shoulder," in order to get to the top of the social order and to be the top sheep. It produces a great deal of irritation.

I want to go to a verse in James 3, because I think it is so good, and I will quit, because we are running late. In fact, what you can do is write down these scriptures and when you get home study them in this order: Ephesians 4—the whole chapter, but specifically verses 1-3, 26, and 32, because what Paul is doing is showing what an individual within the congregation has to do in order to maintain the right kind of social order. Everybody has a responsibility *not* to be like a sheep in this regard.

Then, in I Peter 3:7—apply the principle you learn in Ephesians 4, to a family situation. This is the verse that says, "Husbands dwell with them with understanding, giving honor unto the weaker vessel."

In James 3:17, James is talking about a social situation.

James 3:17-18 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. [Now this is the verse that I want:]
Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

I am going to read you verse 18 in a modern translation—from Barclay's. You will see that it is not a direct word for word translation, but rather a paraphrase; and the man hit the nail right on the head.

James 3:18 (Barclay) For the seed which one day produces the reward which righteousness brings can only be sown when personal relationships are right and by those whose conduct produces such relationships.

Now I know that you cannot really understand it from what I am reading, but what he is saying is that God's purpose—the fruit that He wants from His way of life, the kind of character that He wants in you and me—has to be produced in peace. It cannot be produced in war.

The reason it cannot be produced in war is obvious. When you are in war you are thinking only of yourself. That runs 180 degrees counter to God's nature. God's nature is outgoing. When you are in war, all you are seeking to do is to preserve the self. For God's purpose to be fulfilled to the very best degree, it requires peace.

The seed which one day produces the reward which righteousness brings can only be sown when personal relationships are right, and by those whose conduct produces such relationships.

The peacemakers are going to see God. Not those who butt people aside, aggressively trying to get to the top, asserting themselves and their will and their ideas in every circumstance, coming out to be the big shot. "Out of my way, buddy. That is my pasture." Those people, by implication, are not going to see God.

This is a major reason why God will permit a divorce. Did He not say in I Corinthians 7, let the unbeliever depart. The believer is not under bondage because we are called to peace. God will permit a divorce in order that somebody will be saved because peace exists. In a family that is at war between a husband and wife, it is likely that God is going to lose both of them.

With those who butt and disturb the flock, the flock will not prosper. The shepherd has to make sure that there is peace, that there is freedom from fear from the outside, that there is freedom from tension within, and that there is freedom from aggravation. (We even use the term bugged. That is what bugs do to sheep. They irritate them to no end so they cannot gain weight and they are discontented.) Also then, freedom from hunger—a congregation, a flock will prosper if it is being well fed.

That is the shepherd's responsibility. Our Shepherd will take care of it.