

## Psalm 23 (Part 2)

### **Psalm 23:2-3 The Shepherd Keeps the Flock Moving**

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**Given 09-Jun-90; Tape #BS-PS02**

We are going to begin once again in Psalm 23:1, where we left off. I want to review a little bit so we get up to speed and get a running start into the middle part of this very wonderful, beautiful, picturesque psalm that everyone seems to love. I think that probably, of all the portions of scriptures in the entire Bible, most people would say that they relate to and read this psalm more than any other one, and say that this is their favorite portion of scripture. It says that:

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

That is as far as we got last week, but I wanted to emphasize to you at the beginning of this sermon that, of all domesticated animals, the sheep is the most dependent on its owner for its well being. That is important in understanding the perspective from which this psalm is being written—that the sheep is the most dependent of all animals upon its owner for its well being. They are timid. They are easily scattered. Sometimes they are down right recalcitrant in preferring inferior pastures.

I told you how sheep would worry a fence. No matter how good the pasture is on their side (they could have good, deep, green grass on which to munch), yet somehow or another they still want to get up against the fence, rub against it and try to break through. Even if on the other side there is practically nothing but desert, that is where they want to be.

I gave you the experience I had with my sheep; how they broke out of our fence and went ambling along the railroad track where there was no grass at all. But I learned several things from that. It certainly taught me that sheep are going to try to break out. It just seems to be in their nature to lean against the boundaries, see if they can push it a little further out, and maybe even break out from the constraints that they feel even though they are being well fed.

David—being a shepherd, understanding sheep, understanding shepherding—wrote this psalm from the standpoint of the sheep. What we have here at the very beginning is a bragging exclamation. It is as if he is talking to his neighbor's sheep across the fence. He can see the sheep is not having such a good time because his owner, his master, is not as attentive, not as industrious, not as caring about his sheep. So the sheep looks at the neighbor's pasturage and its shepherd and says, *Boy, the LORD is my shepherd!* He is bragging because he recognizes the superior care that he is getting.

We have to apply these things to our lives and recognize that our Shepherd is the Creator. He is the wisest, most powerful, most balanced Being that has ever been. And I belong to Him because He deliberately chose me.

Most of the time shepherds with small flocks cannot afford to buy great masses of sheep. They will not buy a whole herd. Rather, they buy their flock individually or in twos, in threes, or fours, or fives. The lambs they usually do buy are deliberately chosen after careful scrutiny and then added to their flock. They go over them individually—rubbing back their wool, checking out their legs, hooves, teeth, and ears—because they want to see that they are getting what they are paying for.

And so it is with God. God says, "*You have not chosen Me, but I chose you.*" No man comes to the Father except by the Son. "*No man comes to the Son except the Father draw him and I will raise him up at the last day,*" is what Jesus said.

If this psalm is going to apply to you, personally and individually, you have to recognize that you were deliberately chosen out of this world. It was a decision on the part of God. He said, "*I want that one to be My sheep.*" He begins to draw you to be a part of His flock, of His work.

What that does is eventually make you and me the object of His attention. The way the Bible puts it is that we are the apple of His eye. It means we are the focus of His attention. Certainly there are billions of people on earth, but we are in the focus of His attention. There is no better way that the Hebrew can express that than to say we are the apple, meaning the pupil, of His eye. Everything that He has purposed for us is done in a deliberate way.

Because our God is our Shepherd (and He is the most powerful, wise, balanced, loving and caring Being ever), we are never going to want—that is, lack for proper management. It does not mean that we are not going to lack things. David lacked things. There were times when David did not have a home to hang his hat in and he had to run around from cave to cave. There were times when he was hungry and thirsty; times when he thought his life was hanging in the balance; but he understood that always what was being worked out was within the will of God.

He was the focus of God's attention. He was receiving the management that he needed in his life at that time. And it was all pointed toward the end that he was going to be in the Kingdom of God. We may lack things, but we are never going to lack the best in care and management. We are going to have the very best in guidance and spiritual provision at any given moment.

As a result of this, we have to ask ourselves several questions: Do I recognize His right to me? Do you recognize His right to you? He died for you. He paid for you. We belong to Him. He has every right to manage our lives in the way He sees fit.

This next one is part of that same question, and that is: Do I belong to Him? It is pretty hard to belong to Him if we do not recognize His right to us, because that belonging part is going to pretty much determine the way we are going to react under His management. If we do not react in the right way, it is probably because we do not either see ourselves as really belonging to Him or that He has a right to allow these things to occur in our lives.

The second thing is: Do I respond to His authority, and do I find freedom and fulfillment in this arrangement? Do I have a deep sense of purpose, mission, and direction as a result of the LORD being my Shepherd?

Those are things we can respond to, meditate on, and find application for in our lives. We have to do that. It begins with an acknowledgment that we really do belong to Him and we really are the recipients of the very best in management and care. We sing about "He has the whole world in His hands;" but then we act as though everybody else has the best care, but not me.

We saw in this verse, on making us lie down—where it says, "*He makes me to lie down in green pastures*"—a sheep will not lie down on its own. He can be made to lie down, but he will not lie down on his own unless four factors are met. Those four factors are: They must be free from fear from the outside, because they are by nature timid. They get frightened very easily.

I gave you an illustration how a rabbit bounding out from the bush—a very harmless rabbit—can incite a whole flock of sheep to go dashing off (sometimes even to their death) over a cliff, because one starts dashing and everybody else follows. They have to be free from fear from the outside.

Second, they must be free from tension from within. That is, rivalries from within the flock. And there are rivalries. I used the term pecking order, as with chickens. We humans have social strata and employment strata where we categorize people and think of ourselves as inferior or superior because of where we (or they) stand in the pecking order.

Sheep have a butting order. Usually the big butt is a female, a ewe (because the rams are kept separate from the flock until rutting season when they are needed). But, most of the flock will be lambs or older ewes. There is usually one ewe that butts her way into prominence at the head of the flock and makes her presence known.

I want you to understand that every sheep is a part of this because every sheep knows its butting order. It is not just the chief one, but every one of them. Every one of them has the inclination to butt themselves a little bit higher into the social strata of the flock. It is something that God put in them. It is part of their instinct to do that. They each know their place; but on the other hand, each one wants to get a little bit higher than they are.

In the human sense, we create tension within the flock because of the spirit of competitiveness and rivalry that we have as a part of human nature. So, unless we hold ourselves in control and discipline ourselves, we try to butt ourselves up a little bit higher.

Thirdly, they must be free from pests. There is no animal that is as defenseless as a sheep, especially little lambs. We instinctively know that. There is hardly anything in the animal creation that is more loveable than a little lamb. You want to pick it up in your arms.

Just compare them to a horse or cow. Think of their bodily structure. A horse and cow have great big tails that they can swish around and slap bugs away. They can move very easily away from the source of irritation. But sheep cannot do that. They have a big, thick coat of heavy wool. Most sheep have short, stubby tails. They have ears that cannot reach anywhere. They are helpless. The only one who can come to their aid is the shepherd. He has to do it or they are going to be bugged by bugs—irritation. We even use the term, "*What is bugging him?*"

You know how it is when you have a mosquito or gnat buzzing around your head. You try to swat it because you do not want that thing landing on you and taking a tiny bit of blood. You do not want it to get in your eyes; you do not want it to get in your hair; you just want it to go

away. Bugs very easily irritate sheep.

The fourth thing was that they will not lie down if they are hungry. Hunger causes them to be restless and irritable. If they come upon night and they are hungry, it is very likely that the sheep are not going to lie down and sleep the night through. They will be very restless, stirring around, trying to find some kind of grass in order to forage in.

I think you can begin to see spiritual applications to all of these things. There are things within the congregation that bug you—minor irritations, policies, offense that comes along because of being irritated by somebody's aggressiveness, or what somebody said, or whatever. In this case, it is not rivalry. It is irritation, and you are bugged by the personality of the preacher. You do not like the way he looks or you do not like the way his eyes seem to pierce right through you (so that you are sort of naked before him), or whatever. Things like that irritate you. Policy changes...*How come they got the job and I did not.*" We have to recognize those things are there. And again, IF we are not being fed spiritually, we have a hard time settling down.

Those are things a shepherd has to look out for. And, indeed, our Shepherd WILL look out for those things. He has to, because sheep that are constantly being stirred up are not going to thrive. Their wool will not have the quality to it. It will not grow as fast as it should. They will not put on the weight the way that they should. If they are carrying lambs (which they usually are), the lambs will be underweight, will not be as strong as they should be, and many will die at birth as a result of that. The shepherd has to take care that those things are not happening within his flock. Indeed, our Shepherd has the power, He has the concern, He knows our needs, and He will take care of those things.

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

Sheep are, just like you and I are in this respect, about 70% water. Water has very much to do with the animal's strength, vitality and vigor. It is absolutely essential to its health and well being. We, too, have an absolute need for water. So God uses this as an illustration to you and me of our need for His Spirit.

We are going to very quickly read three scriptures and tie them together—Matthew 5:6, John 7:37 and Ephesians 5:26—because they cover water in three different aspects which are very important to us both physically and spiritually.

Matthew 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

John 7:37 On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink."

Ephesians 5:26 . . . that He might sanctify and cleanse her [meaning the Body, His wife] with the washing of water by the word.

I am going to be concentrating mostly on Matthew 5:6 in illustrating this to you and me. And I want you, at the beginning of this, to understand that the word "hunger" is very strong in the

Greek. It is emphatic. The word "thirst" is even stronger.

What He is talking about is the kind of hunger or thirst that those living on what is essentially a desert would be familiar with. Most of us have never been really hungry and thirsty in the way this verse implies—where it has been a matter of life and death to us.

In some cases, maybe some of us have fasted for a longer length of time (maybe two or three days), and we have not had any water, and we are beginning to approach the place where the thirst especially is of the kind or nature that He is talking about here—where we know if we go on a great deal longer than this, we are probably going to really do damage to our body. We are already beginning to feel as though we are dehydrating considerably. Maybe there are urgent thoughts circling around in our mind, urging us to take a drink of water before we do die.

Most of us are familiar with the kind of hunger or thirst that is very easily assuaged by running over to the faucet and getting a drink of water, or running to the cupboard and getting out a couple of crackers or a piece of bread. And we spread some butter or peanut butter on it, and our hunger and thirst are gone in a matter of moments.

What if you were living in a situation where that kind of ease at assuaging your thirst and hunger was not possible? What if you happened to be out in what was essentially a desert land and you were in the midst of a sandstorm? It was swirling around you for quite a long period of time (maybe a day or two without end). And you could do nothing except put your burnoose over your head, and cover your face and nose. But nonetheless, the dust was filtering inside of that burnoose. It was getting inside of your nose. And the inside of your nose, where there was a little bit of moisture, was caked with dirt. You would begin to be approaching the kind of hunger and thirst that Christ is talking about in Matthew 5: 6.

He said that those kinds of people who hunger and thirst after righteousness in that way are the kinds who are going to be satisfied. I will be honest with you. I do not think that I have that. I certainly do not have it all the time. I do not have it MOST of the time. Once in a while, I do have it. But, most of the time, I have the kind of hunger for God's Word (for His Spirit) that most Americans feel. And we are assuaged; we are satisfied, with just a little bit—enough to get us by! *have done my round on the beads and that is enough for today,* kind of approach.

Christ is saying here (extend this a little bit further) that, "*Blessed is the man who hungers for the WHOLE of righteousness, one who has the urge to completeness.*" Most of us are satisfied with a small measure of good and allow ourselves to become comfortably ensconced in a rut without challenges to growth. That is our problem! And it is the Shepherd's responsibility to lead us in this, and indeed He will. He makes us to lie beside still waters.

In John 7: 37, I want to give you the sense of the way water is used. Water is used there in a little different sense than it is in Matthew 5: 6. In Matthew 5: 6, it is used in the sense of being a desire that we have within us so that we can be righteous. We need the water of God's Spirit in order to have the righteousness of God. We get that hunger (at least partly) from meditation on God's Word, meditation on the way things are in the world, how things have become that way in the world, meditation upon ourselves and our own lacks, and meditation on where we can go to get what it is that is going to satisfy that craving that is there within us.

In John 7:37, the emphasis is on water as refreshment. He is showing that the water of God's Spirit has the power to supply refreshment, vitality, energy and vigor. Can you try to imagine what it would be like for somebody out on the desert (as I just described), and they had been in a sandstorm for a while, and they had their burnoose over their head, and they were sitting there dry as a bone (maybe for several days) with the wind blowing and the sand seeping in? Can you imagine what refreshment would come from a cold glass of water right out of a nice running spring? That is the kind of refreshment God's Word, God's Spirit, has the power to give us.

In Ephesians 5, water is used in the sense of bathing. Water has the power to cleanse. God's word has the power to cleanse. It is interesting that, in the phrase "*the washing of the water by the word*," the Greek uses a word that is spoken. It is the spoken word rather than the written word. It leads the commentators to feel that he is referring to baptism and the words that are given by the ministry just prior to the person being baptized: "*The washing of the water by the word*." The person goes into the water and is symbolically cleansed by that water (the water of baptism) and comes up out of it, resurrected from it, and is clean from sin.

We put the three of these together with Psalm 23:2, and what Christ is saying here is that there is a need in man that can be satisfied only with contact with the true God.

When sheep become thirsty, they tend to grow restless; and they will go out in search of water. If they do not find the good water, they will take whatever is available. Usually they will get this from puddles that have been sitting in the sun for a while, collecting nematodes, liver flukes, and other kinds of diseases that sheep are subject to. They will then drink (imbibe) of those waters and become infected as a result.

In Isaiah 65, beginning in verse 11 God is pronouncing a prophecy.

Isaiah 65:11 "But you are those who forsake the LORD, who forget My holy mountain, who prepare a table for Gad and who furnish a drink offered for Meni. [He is talking about false gods.] Therefore I will number you for the sword, and you shall all bow down to the slaughter; because, when I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not hear, but did evil before My eyes, and chose that in which I do not delight." Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, My servants shall eat [He is making a contrast between His servants, those who are under His care. The Shepherd is going to make sure that His servants eat], but you [the ones against whom He is pronouncing the prophecy] shall be hungry; behold, My servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty.

"Drink" in the Bible means "to take in; to accept; to believe." It means that the person assimilates, in this case, the very life of God by His Spirit, so it becomes a part of every part of his very vitality. We are not talking here about the mere assimilation of facts, of knowledge, proof or evidence. Not those kinds of things. We are talking about all the nuances and subtleties of an intimate relationship—the kind that exist between a shepherd and his sheep; the kind that is supposed to exist between God and us. We are talking about all the subtleties and nuances of

an intimate relationship that has an impact on every aspect of life—things that can be learned only by experiencing life together, but which form the essence of our knowledge, that is, of the spirit of that other person—or God!

What God is complaining about here is that mankind will drink from any dirty pool. This has led to man's history of false governments, false religions, false educational systems, false childrearing practices, false marital practices, and on and on it goes. It reaches into every facet of life—because people are drinking from any stagnant pool that they can find along the way, rather than the pool God would lead them to.

God's people are going to be satisfied. But those who are drinking from any pool that happens to be along the way and are feeding their mind (and therefore their spirit), those people are going to come up hungry. I do not care how much they are eating and drinking of that pool. They are going to get sick and diseased in a spiritual way and they are going to die.

Mankind has an unfulfilled craving to worship. We do this, drinking from any pool, in an effort to fill that longing that is within us and have a sense of well being, of accomplishment and excitement. In order to get this fulfillment, you are able to see from your own experience (as well as looking out on the world) that mankind will drink from any dirty pool they happen to find.

Mankind will eat anything that wiggles or moves. Mankind will put anything into his body to get a momentary thrill or excitement. Mankind will enter into any kind of perversion in order to satisfy this longing or this need. Mankind wants to live on the wild side. That is why it says in Romans 8: 7, "The carnal mind is enmity against God. It is not subject to the law of God and neither, indeed, can be."

Most of us are aware that a sheep is an excellent dry weather animal. But most of us are unaware that a sheep can go for months (apply this, brethren, to your own Bible studying and imbibing God's way) without ever taking a drink of water from a pool if one condition is met, and that is, that he is up early enough to eat the grass in the morning when the dew is still on it. That is all they need. I am not going to say that they are really going to be thriving. But I am saying they will at least continue to live, as long as they are getting up early and they are imbibing of the dew that is on the grass.

In a case like that, they can survive for months without any real damage being done to them. They will not gain a lot of weight, but they will at least survive in pretty good health.

Speaking of Jesus, Mark 1: 35 says:

Mark 1:35 Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.

I think this is an indication to most of us that this is a good time to imbibe on God's Word—at the beginning, while there is still dew on the grass—because we have our Master's example. I do not believe that this is just a figure of speech. It is a practical reality, part of the way to spiritual success by beginning each day imbibing on God's Word, meditating on it, and praying to Him before the mind becomes expended and tired on all of the cares and troubles of the day.

Let us go back to Jeremiah 2:13 to a complaint from God regarding His people and what they have done.

Jeremiah 2:13 For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water.

I think the irony of this is some of us will pursue almost everything else in order to satisfy this longing or craving that can only be satisfied by contact with God. We will pursue science, academic knowledge. We will do reading in the arts, novels. We will travel; involve ourselves in sports, in art, in music. And not a single one of them is wrong in itself. But each one of them has only limited value when it comes to satisfying this craving. It seems like an ephemeral nothing that we can never really quite get a grasp on. God's Word says it is found in Him—in that relationship, and pursuing after righteousness.

Verse 13 is contrasted with verse 5, where Jeremiah says:

Jeremiah 2:5 Thus says the LORD: "What injustice have our fathers found in Me, that they have gone far from Me, have followed idols, and have become idolaters?"

Other translations say, "*They have become vain and they have become worthless.*"

Technology, work, sports, art, music—they all have their place; and they are all part of the general sense of fulfillment, well being, and pleasure. But, if they occupy the wrong place in life (if we give them the wrong priority), we are going to find that we are chasing after wind. Life will not have the vitality and the sense of well being [we desire].

What do we see all around us? Very intelligent people—sometimes moral people, ethical people, fine neighbors—but yet you begin to look a little bit closer, and the lives are shattered by divorce, disappointment because of childrearing problems, health problems, and addiction problems. It never seems to end.

These very people say, "*What difference does it make?*" I have heard smokers say that, have not you? Sure, what difference does it make? Then thirty years later, when they have cancer of the throat, the difference becomes very apparent.

Where are we going to imbibe? What is the long range effect of the "water" we take in to feed our mind and our spirit? Are we going to end up in the Kingdom of God as a result of it? Are our lives going to have that sense of fulfillment because of our relationship with God? Are we going to be people who are ever learning and never coming to the knowledge of the truth—broken in spirit, in heart, and feeling frustrated and empty, feeling as though God does not care? The Bible shows that for people with that last outlook, trouble will suddenly come upon them, and they will all fall in the pit that they themselves have dug.

Let us go on in Psalm 23 to "*He restores my soul.*" How could anybody ever, in the care of the

great Shepherd, become so distressed as to need restoration?

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.

I do not know whether you know it, but "cast down" is a shepherd term. Do you know what is happened to a sheep that is "cast down?" This is one of the weaknesses sheep have and this is one of the reasons why a sheep requires the greatest amount of care of any domesticated animal. What has happened is that a sheep has laid down and it cannot get back up on its feet because it has somehow or another rolled over on its back, the center of gravity has changed (it is right on its backbone) and its hooves are flailing in the air. It does not have the mechanism to throw itself on its side so that it can once again dig its hooves into the turf and get to its feet.

A sheep that is cast down, that is in that kind of position is easy prey for any kind of a predator that might come along—dogs, coyotes, cougars. They are absolutely helpless. This even occurs to the largest, the fattest, the healthiest, sometimes even the strongest sheep. It happens most often to those that are fat (in the sense that they are overweight, or in the sense that they are overweight because they are pregnant). It especially happens to those that are of the long-fleeced variety.

Most of the sheep that we are familiar with in the United States are the short-fleeced variety, where the wool only grows out several inches away from the body. But most of the sheep in the Mid-East and other parts of the world have long-stranded wool that may reach a length of 8 to 12 inches and get so long that it will drag on the ground as the sheep walks along.

The sheep lays down, or it falls down on its side. It stretches out (usually in some kind of a low spot in the ground in order to get some of the cool from the ground and take the weight off its feet). It turns over on its back, and the center of gravity shifts. Then they find themselves with their hooves no longer touching the ground. They panic, and they struggle. And, while they are struggling, the gas from fermenting food (from what they have just eaten) begins to build up in the rumen and it starts to fill up like a balloon blowing up. It puts pressure on the vital organs that are right in the trunk of its body and begins to cut short the diaphragm, which makes it difficult for the sheep to breath. It also begins to shut off circulation to the legs and hooves. If it is a hot day, they will die within several hours.

I do not know if you heard about the woman who was out sunbathing and fell asleep, but she died in six hours, baked by the sun. That is what happens to a sheep if it is a hot dry period of time, and they are over on their back. They will die very quickly. If it is cool and even damp, they will last for several days in that kind of a position.

Luke 15:4-7 "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with

me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance."

Why does the shepherd carry the sheep? It is very likely because what Jesus is describing is a situation where the sheep has become cast. That is how it became separated from the flock (which has been gently, slowly moving on). And this sheep got left behind because it was on its back, flailing away, bleated for a while, and lost its strength. Then the shepherd began to see that the sheep was not there and he began to go out and search. The reason was because of what I described to you before—once gas begin to build up in the rumen, even though the sheep is turned over, it still could not walk (anymore than you could walk when your foot or your leg goes to sleep).

If the shepherd has any kind of feeling at all for his sheep, he frequently begins to notice that a sheep is missing—either because he has counted the flock (which he does constantly) and he has found that one is missing, or he looks up in the sky and he sees buzzards circling around which are waiting for the inevitable.

If he sees buzzards circling around, the shepherd (because of his feelings for his sheep) begins to panic because he realizes that death is probably imminent. And he goes running out, worrying about finding his sheep that has gotten itself cast down and is turned over on its back. He wants to get to it before the buzzards begin to do what God created them to do.

When he finds the sheep, the first thing he does is he lays it over on its side and begins to let the sheep catch its breath. He begins to knead its stomach and diaphragm area in order to start working the gas into another part of the body. After a little while, he will stand the sheep up on its hooves; and he will straddle the sheep in order to hold it up. All the while he is doing this, he is talking to the sheep saying, "*You dirty dumbbell. Whatever led you to do that kind of thing?*" Then he will change his voice and say, "*Honey, I did not mean that. I am really glad to have you back. I did not want to lose you at all. I love you a ton, you dumbbell.*"

There is an alternation of his expression of panic and concern for what the sheep has done to him and, on the other hand, thanksgiving because the sheep is still okay. He appreciates that, and he knows all his sheep by name. All the while, the circulation is beginning to be restored into its legs, but it still cannot walk. Most of the time the shepherd (unless he has a lot of time, which he usually does not have because he has to go back to the ninety-nine) will pick the sheep up, throw it over his shoulders and walk back to the flock.

That is what Jesus was describing—one of His sheep became cast down. There is an alternation of feigned anger from Him at us for wandering away and getting ourselves cast down, and then a loving, affectionate encouragement that comes as a result of His pleasure that we have been found.

I Peter 5:7 . . . cast all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.

Many of us get the idea that God is all angry and frustrated when we fall and we get cast

down—that He is looking for a way to punish us and give us a measure of pain. Brethren, what this is showing us is God is not indifferent to our suffering. We need to understand the mind of our Shepherd. Certainly there will be rebuke at times, but it will always be followed by gentle encouragement and affection so that we will understand that on the one-hand He was concerned enough that His feelings began to be affected regarding us—"Oh that dumb idiot. Look what he is done again. Now I have to go out and get him. But I sure love that person. He has such a wonderful personality." Back and forth He goes. He CARES FOR US! HE FEELS FOR US! He DIED FOR US!

Back in Romans 8, we can add a little bit more to this, where the apostle Paul writes:

Romans 8:31-32 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

...including eternal life; including whatever tender care that is necessary to get us up on our feet again; including going out to seek us, to find where it is we have stumbled and fallen, and to rebuke us because we have allowed ourselves to get in that condition, then encourage nonetheless because He loves us and He is concerned that we be in His kingdom. He will give us ALL things that are necessary for life and for salvation.

Let us look in Psalm 56 for a reinforcement of this principle. David wrote:

Psalm 56:13 For you have delivered my soul from death. Have You not kept [delivered] my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living?

Yes, He has. And He will.

How does a sheep become cast? How do they ever get into that kind of condition? I mentioned to you earlier that it seems to happen to those that are in two categories: they are just plain fat, or they are fat as a result of pregnancy.

We are, to a great extent, just like sheep. What does the sheep do? I told you before that what the sheep does is seek out (what is for the sheep) a nice, cozy, cool, soft, comfortable corner that it feels very good about lying down in; a place where the sheep feels that he is going to be able to enjoy life without hardship—does not have to endure anything, no discipline. I think you are beginning to see where I am headed here.

We, humanly, just like sheep, tend to get into this condition through self-indulgence and the looking for a good, soft life; and we become fat, we think, spiritually. How does one make sure that one does not get in this position? There is a way. It is going to take some effort. How does a human being keep from becoming overweight? That person has to make sure that he sets himself goals within which he can discipline himself to live a prescribed way that will lead to right weight in the right condition.

A sheep cannot do this on its own. When a shepherd notices that a sheep is becoming cast very frequently and this sheep is overweight (not pregnant), what he has to do is immediately restrict the diet of that sheep in order that it will begin to live off its fat. It will begin to lose the weight that is going to eventually make it immobile and unable to move around, and very likely to become cast, and very likely to die.

The first thing he does is cut out the richest portion of the sheep's diet. He takes away the good, rich grains that he normally would feed the sheep. I told you last time that we fed our sheep a mixture of corn, molasses, and oats. I never had any trouble getting those sheep to come near me in the morning. All I did was go out and rattle the pan, and they were so happy because they knew they were going to get off grass and get on corn, molasses, and oats. There was a little bit of salt in there too, which they loved. But, if they got too fat, that is what you cut out.

Humanly, spiritually, what we have to do is we have to set goals within the framework of God's work—spiritual, moral and ethical goals in which we will discipline ourselves to accomplish and overcome. In other words, we have to put ourselves through spiritual exercises. If we do not, we are likely to be like the Laodicean who perceives himself as being rich and increased with goods and in need of nothing. But the way God saw them—they were wretched, poor, miserable, blind and naked—they were not exercising themselves vigorously spiritually in order to maintain good health before God.

Let us explore, "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

Sheep are notorious creatures of habit. That is another one of the characteristics that God created within them. If they are left to themselves, they will follow the same trails until they become ruts. They will graze a field into a desert. They will pollute the land with parasites.

Many mistakenly believe that sheep can get along anywhere. But there is no other class of livestock that requires more careful handling and better management than a sheep. It is the responsibility of the shepherd to make a daily check of his pasture—to check the soil and the grass condition. This requires an intimate knowledge of what the soil should be like and what the grass should like. It means study, research, and observation on these things. It also begins to mean that he is going to do all within his power to maintain the high level of the condition of the field in which his sheep are being maintained.

The great single safeguard that a shepherd can give his sheep for their health is to keep them on the move. Now, I want you to think—God kept Israel on the move for forty years in the wilderness. They were moving somewhere. They had a goal. They had a destination. They were never going to grow into the nation God wanted them to grow in if they just stood still and did nothing.

Remember that the cloud and the pillar of fire was the One that guided and directed the direction of their movement. That is the Shepherd. But, on the other hand, the people had to walk their way into the land of Canaan. God kept them moving. He kept them going through a series of experiences that He recorded because there are spiritual lessons contained within those experiences that are helpful to you and me.

With literal sheep, what this does is it prevents overgrazing. The shepherd keeps his sheep rotating between three or four or five different pastures so that one day they are here, the next day they are here, the next day here. Every time they go out, they come back to the same home base. In the meantime, this field is recuperating from the grazing it had on the first day. This field is recuperating from the grazing it had on the second day. He keeps rotating his sheep around like that and that way the sheep always have the very best of pasturage. Every time they go in, there is new fresh strong grass to eat.

There is one other physical thing, and that is that their manure is constantly dropping on the ground; and the manure contains parasites and so forth that they have taken in while they are eating. The parasites are defecated out and go on the ground; and those parasites, which are in the manure, have a life cycle that the shepherd is aware of. The shepherd has to be very careful that he manipulates his flock through the life cycle of these parasites so that the next time the sheep come around they are not taking in the living parasites that they themselves dropped a little while before.

It takes a lot of understanding and care in the management. He has to keep his sheep on the move. There is nothing on a day-to-day basis that occupies the shepherd's attention more than to keep his flock moving from one pasture to another.

I saiah 53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way.

Sometimes, brethren, the parallels with sheep are almost embarrassing. All of us have gone out of the path of righteousness—every single one of us. God calls us stubborn and stiff-necked. Our own way is terribly destructive. Look at what we (God's human sheep) have done to the earth. In this case, I am not talking about the church. I am talking about mankind in general. Look at what mankind in general has done to the earth because of our insistence of going our own way and not walking in the paths of righteousness. All of this, of course, is interlocked with personal pride and self-assertion. Just as sheep will blindly ruin a pasture, so do we our lives.

Does it not say in Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25, "There is a way that seems right unto a man, but the end thereof is the way of death?" That is what has happened to earth. So even when we are baptized, Christ warns in Luke 14:26-28 that baptism is not going to take away human nature.

In Romans 7, Paul describes the wrestling that he had to do with his own nature (and he called it "sin that is within me")—wrestling in order to keep it disciplined and under control. But always it was there, under the surface, trying to pull him away from the paths of righteousness and take him back to living and thinking in the way he had before.

"All we like sheep have gone astray." Jesus says in John 14:6, "I AM the way, the truth, and the life." Even as He embodied truth, He embodies the way to live.

Jesus never made light of the way and what it is going to cost us. He made very clear that it was going to take some rigid self-discipline. STRAIGHT is the way and NARROW the gate—straight meaning difficult. Six times that statement is made in regard to a person denying himself. If one denies himself, he is going to find life. But if one is self-indulgent, they are going

to lose life.

Jesus made it very clear that there was going to be a need for self-denial and discipline, and that a whole new set of attitudes would be needed. It is very interesting that the book of Matthew—the first book in the New Testament, the first book that contains the teachings of Jesus Christ—lays down in three chapters a set of attitudes (beatitudes) that His people are going to *have* to have.

Brethren, Jesus also said there are compensations along the way. Yes, though there is a need for self-denial and discipline, there is a need for denying ourselves; there is a need for new attitudes. He also showed that replacing our way would be a relationship that would more than compensate us for *anything* that we have to give up in order to follow that way. (I am talking about the relationship with our Father.)

I am going to give you six attitudes that I want you to consider over this next week; attitudes that are part of this path of righteousness.

1. I John 3:16 *Instead of loving myself most, I am willing to love Christ best and others at least as much as myself.* We are not talking about a soft sentimentality. The love of I Corinthians 13, the love of God, is a deliberate setting of the will. It may contain warm, affectionate feelings, and I hope that it does because that makes it much better. But the bottom line is the love of God is a deliberate setting of the will to do right.
2. John 17:17 *Instead of being one of the crowd, I am willing to be singled out.* We are sanctified by the Word of God and God's Word is truth. We are willing to be singled out, set apart from the gang. The reason for this in the context of this sermon is that sheep want to be part of the group. We do not want to be different. We do not want to stand out. We are talking about standing out in terms of righteousness in relationship with God. Standing out has a tendency to bring criticism and sarcasm. And, when we begin to stand out, then we have to bear that burden. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.
3. I Corinthians 6:6-8 *Instead of insisting on my own rights, I am willing to forgo them in favor of others—to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to take the lower seat, to play second fiddle.* Brethren, the blessing from this is a tremendous emancipation from personal pride. A person who is going to meet those criteria is going to be very difficult to offend.
4. James 4:13-15 *Instead of being boss, I am willing to be at the bottom of the heap, get rid of this drive for self-assertion and self-pleasing.* Do you know what the fruit of that is? Peace and contentment.
5. Romans 8:28 *Instead of finding fault with life and always asking why [I am talking about asking why in the wrong attitude. God knows why and eventually we will know why], I am willing to accept every circumstance in life in an attitude of gratitude.* Is not our Shepherd in charge? Is not He the kindest, most merciful, most diligent, most concerned being of

all? Why do we feel entitled to critically question the reason for everything?

6. Luke 22:42 *Instead of asserting my will, I will learn to cooperate with God's wishes.* You are going to begin to find that about 90% of Christian living—of being a true follower of God—consist of setting your will by faith to follow God. When you cancel out the big *I*, you do away with this.

Brethren, many of us, most of us, possess plenty of knowledge, but few really possess the determination to act on it—to keep on moving to new ground, and staying in the path of righteousness.