

Dear Friends,

For such good reason, believers have long found steady peace and comfort in Psalm 23. How often we find our greatest comfort from the simple lessons in Scripture, not the complicated ones. Although I grew up on a farm, our family raised dairy cattle, not sheep. There may be some general similarities, but each animal has its own qualities and behaviors. To help me understand more about sheep, I refreshed my reading of "A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm" by Phillip Keller. This book has long been a favorite of Bible students who wanted to learn more about Psalm 23 and the frequent Bible use of shepherds and sheep to teach spiritual truths. It is readily available and an easy read. I highly recommend it. I ignore Keller's doctrinal beliefs and study his knowledge of sheep and shepherds.

*Know ye that the LORD he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. (Psalm 100:3 KJV)*

As a shepherd in his youth, David had personal knowledge of every detail of shepherding and sheep. Clearly from his writing, David took his shepherd's responsibility to protect and care for his family's sheep seriously, even on occasion literally putting his own life on the line to protect the sheep. And our "Great Shepherd" has done far more. We can fully and comfortably adopt the rich comforts of this Psalm in our own seasons of trial, as well as in our own times when we most need deliverance from ourselves. Our Shepherd is quite able to deal with both our problems. What a Savior--what a Shepherd--we have!

Lord bless,  
Joe Holder

### **Content in Green Pastures and Still Waters**

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. (Psalm 23:2 KJV)*

Although I grew up on a farm, my family didn't raise sheep. To learn about sheep and their care, I've had to research the question. I highly recommend "A Shepherd Looks at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm" by Phillip Keller. Keller owned a sheep farm for some time; as a believer, he applied his firsthand knowledge of sheep and their care to Psalm 23. Keller is easy to read and gives rich insights into the symbolism David employs in Psalm 23.

A sheep will only lie down when it is content, when it feels safe and comfortable. Fear, friction with other sheep, annoyance by insects, or hunger will leave a sheep agitated and unwilling to lie down. Apply each of these qualities to the Lord's people, to you and me. David did not suggest that the Lord, his Shepherd, somehow forced him to lie down or irresistibly programmed him to lie down. Rather he taught us that our Shepherd supplies all our needs and protects us from danger, so we are content and therefore happy to lie down and rest our souls. In many ways this behavior in sheep reminds me of the cattle my family raised. My father provided our cows with a lush pasture where they could graze to their heart's content. It included a brook of running fresh water, and many large shade trees where the cows could find cool shade in the heat of mid-day. They had all they needed. They freely grazed through most of the morning, visited the brook for a deep drink of cool fresh water, and then they found their favorite shade

tree where they would lie down for as long as they wished and chewed their cud, essential to their digestion. Dad didn't micromanage our cows, forcing them to do any of these things minute by minute. He simply made them available in a safe setting for our cows. David's point is similar. Our God doesn't micromanage every step and millisecond of our day, but He takes every step to ensure that our needs are met and that we may feel safe under His protective care.

*Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased. I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety. (Psalm 4:7-8 KJV)*

David rejoiced that he could enjoy the Lord's abundant care of him and his needs, so he could lie down and sleep peacefully at night, knowing the Lord watched over him through the night. This lesson richly describes a contented sheep under his "Good Shepherd's" care.

If we review all the disruptions that might prevent a sheep from contentedly lying down, they all depend on the shepherd with one exception, sheep bickering, competing, or otherwise behaving disagreeably—and dishonorably—toward other sheep, and therefore their shepherd. And often the shepherd must personally intervene with disagreeable sheep to nudge them back into harmony with him and with other sheep in the fold. When a "Sheep," either a literal sheep or a symbolic sheep, one of the Lord's born-again children, finds himself in discord with other believers, know it or not, he/she is also in discord with the Lord. John in 1 John writes extensively on this point.

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.* By "maketh me to lie down," David in no way implies that God personally and irresistibly caused him to do everything he did. No shepherd could have imagined such an idea. He rather describes the rich and caring provisions of his Shepherd that satisfied all his needs so he could lie down contentedly.

*Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Again in this place, which is desolate without man and without beast, and in all the cities thereof, shall be an habitation of shepherds causing their flocks to lie down. (Jeremiah 33:12 KJV)*

The same Hebrew word appears in this verse of a human shepherd "causing" his flocks to lie down. If the Lord micromanages every action we take, must we conclude the illogical and—at its heart—immoral idea that the Lord causes us to go astray, to disrupt a whole flock by bickering and fighting with each other? This idea contradicts Biblical teaching.

*For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints. (1 Corinthians 14:33 KJV)*

*From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? (James 4:1 KJV)*

How many similar passages could we cite that all teach this same truth? Our God is not amoral, irresistibly causing us to do whatever He whimsically wishes with no regard for moral integrity. Nothing in human imagination could more contradict Biblical teaching and God's fixed moral character.

What is David's teaching in this point? As a shepherd in his youth, David well knew that the only way sheep would lie down contentedly was that they felt safe and satisfied. Their shepherd must take good care of them to enable them to find such peaceful and restorative rest.

While some folks, "Sheep" in the symbolism of this Psalm, seem inclined to promote, if not enjoy controversy, the Lord views it differently.

*Therefore thus saith the Lord God unto them; Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat cattle and between the lean cattle. Because ye have thrust with side and with shoulder, and pushed all the diseased with your horns, till ye have scattered them abroad; Therefore will I save my flock, and they shall no more be a prey; and I will judge between cattle and cattle. And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd. (Ezekiel 34:20-23 KJV)*

Typically, when a believer becomes self-willed and abrasive toward other believers, they rationalize their "Pushy" combative conduct, thinking "No one cares. I can do as I wish." God warns us in these verses. When believers abuse each other, the Lord shall intervene and "*judge between...cattle.*" Notice his stern disapproval of abrasive sheep. "*Because ye have thrust with side and with shoulder, and pushed all the diseased with your horns, till ye have scattered them abroad.*" Every detail in this description accurately describes a bully sheep pushing and butting the weaker sheep for the sheer pleasure of dominating. It equally describes a "Bully" believer being overbearing and abusive to other believers. Does all this end with the senseless and cruel abuse by abrasive sheep? Not at all. "*Therefore will I save my flock, and they shall no more be a prey; and I will judge between cattle and cattle. And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd.*" More than a few times I've personally observed how the Lord so masterfully and effectively either removed or neutralized an abusive believer in ways most people wouldn't even notice. We need never doubt our Lord's watchful eye over His people and, when necessary, His firm hand raised against "Sheep" who are not content to live peaceably with their fellow-sheep in His flock. Take heart. If you find yourself on the receiving end of an overbearing person, you've likely tried all the common ways that failed to alter

the situation. Pause and pray for the Lord, for your “Good Shepherd” to “**Judge between cattle,**” to judge His people and restore peaceful harmony in His house. Then rest in Him and trust whatever He may choose to do. He takes care of His sheep. Should we be as passive as a beleaguered sheep in such situations? No, not at all. Scripture teaches us actively and continuously to take our plight to Jesus in prayer and, with strong steady faith in Him, trust Him to take care of us. In some cases, He may choose to walk with us through the storm—or the stormy relationship—leaving the abuser for judgment on another day. In other cases, He may speak to the troubled waters in our life and calm them immediately and powerfully, removing the “Pushy” overbearing person from our life. In either case, our “Shepherd” promises to stand close beside us. We shall never face our trials alone.

*...he leadeth me beside the still waters.* Every domesticated animal loves fresh water. But sheep supposedly do not like moving, running water. They prefer the still waters in a pool to the running stream of a brook. David knew; our Shepherd knows the waters where we may drink freely “*of the water of life*” and find refreshing. And that is precisely where He leads us.

For many years, I have purchased only British published KJV Bibles with center column references and footnotes. Historically, Cambridge and Oxford were the two leading KJV publishers in England. Many years ago, Oxford discontinued publishing KJV Bibles, selling their KJV technology to R. L. Allan, a Scottish publisher of high-quality Bibles. I regularly check the center column in my Bibles for footnotes that offer an alternate reading suggested by the KJV translators to the actual text. I’ve never found an alternate reading that contradicted the primary wording, but the footnoted reading often adds a nuance of thought that I find helpful. My Allan (Oxford) KJV offers “**waters of rest**” for “*still waters.*” My Cambridge KJV uses similar words, “**waters of quietness.**” Typically, our cows went to the stream for water after they had enjoyed the morning grazing and were full and content. I presume something similar in sheep. Food and water should be followed by a time of quiet relaxed rest, so it is logical to associate water with “rest” or peaceful “quietness.”

An ancient Hebrew dictionary traces Old Testament words to very early use and meaning, including pictograms of the Hebrew characters. In the case of “*still waters,*” the definition of the word is beneficial. The definition breaks down the Hebrew word character into two parts, followed by this explanation.

Combined these mean "continue outside". The shepherd would guide his flock to a place of water. Here is water for drinking as well as green grass for pasturing. Once the flock arrives, they are free to rest after the long journey. A guided journey to a place of rest. (E-Sword Bible app, Ancient Hebrew Dictionary)

We are all troubled by life and by our own wanderings. This is an excellent time to renew our faithful connection to our Good Shepherd, to refresh our minds on His faithful care.

Elder Joe Holder