

Dear Friends,

David--and Jesus--understood far more than we that describing the Lord's people as "Sheep" was by no means complimentary. We idolize the symbol as Scripture uses it. However, spend a little time studying the real nature and life of the average sheep. Dirty, dependent, defenseless, prone to wander and with little sense of direction to find its way back to the fold, sheep are definitely not the most complimentary domestic animal on an ancient farm. But the Lord knows us far better than we know ourselves, and He knows how frighteningly similar to sheep we are. His choice of the symbol is more accurate than we'd like.

Although I started a series on a "Sermon on the Mount Lifestyle," Psalm 23 has weighed so heavily on my mind in recent weeks that I decided to pause that series and spend a few weeks with you studying Psalm 23. I pray you will find both comfort, healing, and instruction in this study.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

My Shepherd

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1 KJV)

Lord willing, I hope to return to the Sermon on the Mount lifestyle. However, my mind has recently been so nudged to Psalm 23 that I decided to turn to it for our present study. For good reason, this Psalm is a rich source of instruction and comfort for tired beleaguered pilgrims. God chose this symbol of His care for His people, a symbol that He inserted into his Book frequently. But the symbol contains far more instruction than occasional timely comfort.

The Lord is my shepherd. Before the Lord appointed David as king of Israel, David was shepherd over his family's flocks, so he knew by personal experience the reality of shepherding sheep. David understood what so many modern believers fail to grasp. Sheep do not choose their shepherd. A sheep is either born into the flock or it is purchased by the shepherd. Both as a "Sheep" in the Lord's flock and as king of Israel, the Lord chose David; David did not choose the Lord. Remember Samuel's visit to the house of Jesse. The prophet rejected David's brothers one by one. Only Jesse's son whom the Lord chose could receive the prophet's anointing. David could not have imagined someone thinking, "The Lord wants to be your shepherd. Will you allow Him to be your shepherd?" Neither did God when He chose this symbol for His Book.

Sheep are sorely dependent. They may live in plenty and safety or in anxious need, all due to their shepherd. When David said, "*The Lord is my shepherd,*" he wrote with joyful peace that he could have no better shepherd.

Sheep are among the most defenseless and needy of domesticated animals. They are also among the more thoughtless animals imaginable. They require constant care and protection. So many things can go wrong with sheep who are not under a devoted shepherd's care. A sheep relies on its shepherd for food, for health, for protection from ravenous beasts and natural dangers. It depends on the shepherd for

rich grazing and fresh water. When David wrote, “*The Lord is my shepherd,*” he claimed far more than we can imagine. Everything a good shepherd provides for his flock David claimed in the Lord by his confession.

But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. (Matthew 9:36 KJV)

Our Shepherd watches over us “with compassion.” He knows all the things we need, more than we know them. Often the greatest threat to a sheep is the sheep itself. A caring shepherd must frequently save a sheep from itself. Oh, how often the Lord intervenes in our lives to save us from ourselves. Apart from His caring oversight, each of us would be like the people described in this verse. We’d faint and scatter abroad, wandering without direction or godly purpose, hungry, thirsty, and bewildered. In KJV Bibles with marginal references, “fainted” is footnoted with “were tired and lay down.” The image these words stir in our minds is of an exhausted and discouraged sheep who becomes so tired and weary that it simply gives up and lies down. Have you lived through such moments in your life? Learn from this verse. At the very moment you feel most helpless and discouraged Jesus knows and has the greatest compassion for you.

A shepherd does not micromanage every step in his sheep’s activity. Much of the time he watches in the background, stepping into the sheep’s life only when danger, disease, or other needs appear. A shepherd leads: he does not drive his sheep. A common cliché in today’s Christian culture oversteps the Biblical pattern of discipleship, “God has a plan for your life.” True enough, God has simply and repeatedly set forth His direction for our conduct in Scripture. As an example, consider 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 KJV. God’s will for our life is not a micromanaged robotic control. It is rather a wise caring Shepherd’s oversight and direction which we need to protect ourselves from ourselves and to strengthen our connection with our Shepherd and with other sheep in His flock.

A sheep that abandons the flock and isolates itself is a sheep in grave danger. If God micromanages every event in your life, does that include your sins and your failures? From the Garden of Eden to the end of Revelation, ***Scripture emphasizes personal responsibility and accountability to God for our conduct.*** This robotic micromanaged master plan idea strips you of both, not the Bible way. (Galatians 6:7-10 KJV)

Ancient shepherds made every major decision for their flock. Safe and healthy sheep stayed in the flock and under their shepherd’s careful eye. Pride has destroyed the joy and safe blessings of many believers. They stubbornly choose their own private pasture and companions. Little do they know the dangers they face by this choice. Jesus—tell me what to do? No thanks, I’ll tell Him what I intend to do and ask for His agreement. And where do we find this attitude in Scripture? More the opposite.

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20 KJV)

These verses ring true to the healthy relationship between a shepherd and his flock. He bought the sheep. He puts his own life on the line daily for the flock. He seeks out rich grazing and leads them to it. He is ever watchful for dangers and disease of all kinds. The safest thing a wise sheep can do is to stay close to the shepherd and the flock. How similar we are to sheep! We despise the idea that we should submit to Jesus and His ways for our lives, not chase our own private paths. But our safest choice is always to align ourselves permanently with our Shepherd, and His flock, and to do everything we can possibly do, body, soul, and spirit, to honor Him, to “glorify” Him by our conduct.

I shall not want. David did not write that he would never wish for something he didn’t have. Nor did he write that he could “Name it and claim it” for anything he wanted. Study his life. Does his life appear to be that of a man who received everything he wished? Hardly. Persecuted, hated, and feared by his own king, face to face with a giant Philistine warrior, rebellion in his own family. I suspect that many contemporary Bible readers interpret this word “want” as “wish.” The Hebrew word translated “want” in this verse means to lack or be deficient. When David faced Goliath with his shepherd’s sling and five smooth stones, did he lack anything? Never! He only needed one stone; he had four spare stones. Trace his life. Whatever he faced, ***when*** David lived in conscious submission to his Shepherd, he never faced it alone. His Shepherd was always nearby to protect and deliver him.

Consider Paul and his thorn in the flesh. He never tells us what that thorn was, but we learn that it was a painful difficulty for him. Did he face it alone? No, the Lord gave Paul special assurance that, despite living with the thorn, he would also live with ever-sufficient grace to enable him to deal with that thorn. Whenever Paul faced hostile threats for his faith and for preaching Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18 KJV), the Lord always guided him to a safe escape. When he was bitten by a deadly viper while shipwrecked and stranded (Acts 28 KJV), the Lord so protected Paul that the viper’s venom had no effect whatever on him, despite the natives of the island expecting him to die momentarily.

Study Hebrews 11, especially the summary list in Hebrews 11:33-38. Despite torture and loss, the Old Testament heroes of faith endured unimaginable trials and found deliverance in the Lord’s kind grace—how else—by faith. They never “Lacked.”

The major principle that David intended seems more likely to be the faithful care of His Shepherd than of his own imagination or his desire to live his entire life on “Easy Street.” Sincere confession: twice in my life I faced life-threatening health situations. For a time, I was fearful and anxious. But in both cases, just at the right time and in a way I could not have imagined or anticipated, the Lord gave me His rich “Shepherd’s” assurance that He was still my Shepherd and that, whatever I faced, I would not face it alone. He would be with me. What more could we need or ask?

Whether we have an unusual experience or no unique experience at all, the Lord, our “Shepherd,” has repeatedly promised us in Scripture that He shall be with us as our “Shepherd” to bless and to aid, regardless the pains or trials we might face. Think about David’s youthful experience as shepherd of his father’s flocks. Bears and lions threatened the flocks. Can you imagine the fear in a defenseless sheep’s heart when he heard the growl or saw the ominous image of those beasts approaching? Only one thing stood between that helpless sheep and the ravenous beast, young David, a faithful shepherd. No wild beast could match David’s fierce loyalty to his father’s sheep. Think. Our Shepherd is far greater than David or any other human shepherd. He created this universe. He is the glue that binds it all together in a massive system that works. Will you ever face anything bigger or stronger than your Shepherd? Never!

*Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, **I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.*** (Hebrews 13:5 KJV)

If you knew you had everything you'd ever need, would you have any reason to covet anything belonging to someone else? Think about what you have today. Really ponder it. Are you content? Or do you long for more? Content with where you live? With your daily activities? Your career? Your friends? Your church family? Your pastor? If discontent even briefly enters your mind in any of these areas—or any other for that matter—memorize this verse, especially that last thought, **“for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.”** Who said those words? **My Shepherd! Your Shepherd!** Not only did He say it, but He went on record to you with His promise. And my Shepherd always keeps His word. Put that amazing thought deep into your mind. Put it in a safe nook where it will never be rooted out. And when life's troubles put you in their pressure cooker—and they shall—visit that little nook, dust off those words, and repeat them over and over until the clouds break and the “Day Star,” **your Shepherd**, arises in your heart and puts it all right—or gives you wise grace to endure your own thorn. But remember. You have what He gave to Paul. His words to Paul are His words to you, **“My grace is sufficient.”** What more do we need!

Elder Joe Holder