

W. PHILLIP KELLER

A
Shepherd
LOOKS AT
Psalm
23

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A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23

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*I*n tribute to “Chic”
who during many years of
adventure was my beloved
mate and companion

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INTRODUCTION

To a great extent the Bible is a collection of books written by men of humble origin, who penned under the guidance of God's Spirit. Much of its terminology and teaching is couched in rural language, dealing with outdoor subjects and natural phenomena. The audience to whom these writings were originally addressed were for the most part themselves simple, nomadic folk familiar with nature and the outdoor life of the countryside about them.

Today this is not the case. Many who either read or study the Scriptures in the twentieth century come from an urban, man-made environment. City people, especially, are often unfamiliar with such subjects as livestock, crops, land, fruit, or wildlife. They miss much of the truth taught in God's Word because they are not familiar with such things as sheep, wheat, soil, or grapes.

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Yet divine revelation is irrevocably bound up with the basic subjects of the natural world. Our Lord Himself, when He was amongst us, continually used natural phenomena to explain supernatural truth in His parables. It is a sound, indisputable method, both scientifically and spiritually valid.

All this is understandable and meaningful when we recognize the fact that God is author and originator of both the natural and supernatural (spiritual). The same basic laws, principles, and procedures function in these two contiguous realms.

Therefore it follows that to understand one is to grasp the parallel principle in the other.

It must be stated here that it is through this type of scriptural interpretation that my own understanding of the Bible has become meaningful. It explains in part, too, why truths which I shared with various audiences have been long remembered by them with great clarity.

Accordingly I make no apologies for presenting this collection of “shepherd insights” into the well-known and loved—but often misunderstood—23rd Psalm.

This book has been developed against a rather unique background which has perhaps given me a deeper appreciation than most men of what David had in mind when he wrote his beautiful poem. First of all, I grew up and lived in East Africa, surrounded by simple native herders whose customs

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closely resembled those of their counterparts in the Middle East. So I am intimately acquainted with the romance, the pathos, the picturesque life of an Eastern shepherd. Secondly, as a young man, I actually made my own livelihood for about eight years as a sheep owner and sheep rancher. Consequently I write as one who has had firsthand experience with every phase of sheep management. Later, as the lay pastor of a community church, I shared the truths of this Psalm, as a shepherd, with my “flock,” every Sunday for several months.

It is, therefore, out of the variety of these firsthand experiences with sheep that the following chapters have emerged. To my knowledge this is the first time that a down-to-earth, hard-handed sheepman has ever written at length about the Shepherd’s Psalm.

There is one difficulty that arises when writing a book based on a familiar portion of the Scriptures. One disillusion or disenchant the reader with some of his former notions about the Psalm. Like much spiritual teaching, the 23rd Psalm has had a certain amount of sentimental imagery wrapped around it with no sound basis in actual life. Some ideas advanced about it have, in fact, been almost ludicrous.

I would ask, then, that the reader approach the pages that follow with an open mind and an unbiased spirit. If he does, fresh truth and exciting glimpses of God’s care and concern for him will

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flood over his being. Then he will be brought into a bold, new appreciation of the endless effort put forth by our Saviour for His sheep. Out of this there will then emerge a growing admiration and affection for the Great Shepherd of his soul.

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“THE LORD IS MY
SHEPHERD”

The Lord! But who is the Lord? What is His character? Does He have adequate credentials to be my Shepherd—my manager—my owner?

And if He does—how do I come under His control? In what way do I become the object of His concern and diligent care?

These are penetrating, searching questions, and they deserve honest and basic examination.

One of the calamities of Christianity is our tendency to talk in ambiguous generalities.

David, the author of the poem, himself a shepherd and the son of a shepherd, later to be known as the “Shepherd King” of Israel, stated explicitly, “The Lord is my shepherd.” To whom did he refer?

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He referred to Jehovah, the Lord God of Israel.

His statement was confirmed by Jesus the Christ. When He was God incarnate amongst men, He declared emphatically, “I am the good shepherd.”

But who was this Christ?

Our view of Him is often too small—too cramped—too provincial—too human.

And because it is, we feel unwilling to allow Him to have authority or control—much less outright ownership of our lives.

He it was who was directly responsible for the creation of all things both natural and supernatural (see Colossians 1:15–20).

If we pause to reflect on the person of Christ—on His power and His achievements—suddenly like David we will be glad to state proudly, “The Lord—*He* is my Shepherd!”

But before we do this it helps to hold clearly in mind the particular part played upon our history by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

God the Father is God the author—the originator of all that exists. It was in His mind, first, that all took shape.

God the Son, our Saviour, is God the artisan—the artist, the Creator of all that exists. He brought into being all that had been originally formulated in His Father’s mind.

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God the Holy Spirit is God the agent who presents these facts to both my mind and my spiritual understanding so that they become both real and relative to me as an individual.

Now the beautiful relationships given to us repeatedly in Scripture between God and man are those of a father to his children and a shepherd to his sheep. These concepts were first conceived in the mind of God our Father. They were made possible and practical through the work of Christ. They are confirmed and made real in me through the agency of the gracious Holy Spirit.

So when the simple—though sublime—statement is made by a man or woman that “The Lord is my shepherd,” it immediately implies a profound yet practical working relationship between a human being and his Maker.

It links a lump of common clay to divine destiny—it means a mere mortal becomes the cherished object of divine diligence.

This thought alone should stir my spirit, quicken my own sense of awareness, and lend enormous dignity to myself as an individual. To think that God in Christ is deeply concerned about me as a particular person immediately gives great purpose and enormous meaning to my short sojourn upon this planet.

And the greater, the wider, the more majestic my concept is of the Christ—the more vital will

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be my relationship to Him. Obviously, David, in this Psalm, is speaking not as the shepherd, though he was one, but as a sheep, one of the flock. He spoke with a strong sense of pride and devotion and admiration. It was as though he literally boasted aloud, “Look at who my shepherd is — my owner — my manager!” The Lord is!

After all, he knew from firsthand experience that the lot in life of any particular sheep depended on the type of man who owned it. Some men were gentle, kind, intelligent, brave, and selfless in their devotion to their stock. Under one man sheep would struggle, starve, and suffer endless hardship. In another’s care they would flourish and thrive contentedly.

So if the Lord is my Shepherd I should know something of His character and understand something of His ability.

To meditate on this I frequently go out at night to walk alone under the stars and remind myself of His majesty and might. Looking up at the star-studded sky I remember that at least 250,000,000 x 250,000,000 such bodies — each larger than our sun, one of the smallest of the stars — have been scattered across the vast spaces of the universe by His hand. I recall that the planet earth, which is my temporary home for a few short years, is so minute a speck of matter in space that if it were possible to transport our most powerful telescope to our

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nearest neighbor star, Alpha Centauri, and look back this way, the earth could not be seen, even with the aid of that powerful instrument.

All this is a bit humbling. It drains the “ego” from a man and puts things in proper perspective. It makes me see myself as a mere mite of material in an enormous universe. Yet the staggering fact remains that Christ, the Creator of such an enormous universe of overwhelming magnitude, deigns to call Himself my Shepherd and invites me to consider myself His sheep—His special object of affection and attention. Who better could care for me?

By the same sort of process I stoop down and pick up a handful of soil from the backyard or roadside. Placing it under an electron microscope I am astounded to discover it teems with billions upon billions of micro-organisms. Many of them are so complex in their own peculiar cellular structure that even a fraction of their functions in the earth are not yet properly understood.

Yes, He the Christ—the Son of God—brought all of this into being. From the most gigantic galaxy to the most minute microbe, all function flawlessly in accordance with definite laws of order and unity which are utterly beyond the mind of finite man to master.

It is in this sense, first of all, that I am basically bound to admit that His ownership of me as a human

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being is legitimate—simply because it is He who brought me into being and no one is better able to understand or care for me.

I belong to Him simply because He deliberately chose to create me as the object of His own affection.

It is patently clear that most men and women refuse to acknowledge this fact. Their deliberate attempts to deny that such a relationship even exists or could exist between a man and his Maker demonstrate their abhorrence of admitting that anyone really can claim ownership or authority over them by virtue of bringing them into being.

This was of course the enormous “risk” or “calculated chance,” if we may use the term, which God took in making man initially.

But in His usual magnanimous manner He took the second step in attempting to restore this relationship which is repeatedly breached by men who turn their backs on Him.

Again in Christ He demonstrated at Calvary the deep desire of His heart to have men come under His benevolent care. He Himself absorbed the penalty for their perverseness, stating clearly that “we all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6).

Thus, in a second very real and vital sense I truly belong to Him simply because He has bought

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me again at the incredible price of His own laid-down life and shed blood.

Therefore He was entitled to say, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

So there remains the moving realization that we have been bought with a price, that we are really not our own and He is well within His rights to lay claim upon our lives.

I recall quite clearly how in my first venture with sheep, the question of paying a price for my ewes was so terribly important. They belonged to me only by virtue of the fact that I paid hard cash for them. It was money earned by the blood and sweat and tears drawn from my own body during the desperate grinding years of the Depression. And when I bought that first small flock I was buying them literally with my own body which had been laid down with this day in mind.

Because of this I felt in a special way that they were in very truth a part of me and I a part of them. There was an intimate identity involved which, though not apparent on the surface to the casual observer, nonetheless made those thirty ewes exceedingly precious to me.

But the day I bought them I also realized that this was but the first stage in a long, lasting endeavor in which from then on, I would, as their owner, have to continually lay down my life for

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them if they were to flourish and prosper. Sheep do not “just take care of themselves” as some might suppose. They require, more than any other class of livestock, endless attention and meticulous care.

It is no accident that God has chosen to call us sheep. The behavior of sheep and human beings is similar in many ways as will be seen in further chapters. Our mass mind (or mob instincts), our fears and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, our perverse habits are all parallels of profound importance.

Yet despite these adverse characteristics Christ chooses us, buys us, calls us by name, makes us His own, and delights in caring for us.

It is this last aspect which is really the third reason why we are under obligation to recognize His ownership of us. He literally lays Himself out for us continually. He is ever interceding for us; He is ever guiding us by His gracious Spirit; He is ever working on our behalf to ensure that we will benefit from His care.

In fact, Psalm 23 might well be called “David’s Hymn of Praise to Divine Diligence.” For the entire poem goes on to recount the manner in which the Good Shepherd spares no pains for the welfare of His sheep.

Little wonder that the poet took pride in belonging to the Good Shepherd. Why shouldn’t he?

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In memory I can still see one of the sheep ranches in our district which was operated by a tenant sheepman. He ought never to have been allowed to keep sheep. His stock were always thin, weak, and riddled with disease or parasites. Again and again they would come and stand at the fence staring blankly through the woven wire at the green lush pastures which my flock enjoyed. Had they been able to speak I am sure they would have said, "Oh, to be set free from this awful owner!"

This is a picture which has never left my memory. It is a picture of pathetic people the world over who have not known what it is to belong to the Good Shepherd . . . who suffer instead under sin and Satan.

How amazing it is that individual men and women vehemently refuse and reject the claims of Christ on their lives. They fear that to acknowledge His ownership is to come under the rule of a tyrant.

This is difficult to comprehend when one pauses to consider the character of Christ. Admittedly there have been many false caricatures of this Person, but an unbiased look at His life quickly reveals an individual of enormous compassion and incredible integrity.

He was the most balanced and perhaps the most beloved being ever to enter the society of men. Though born amid most disgusting surroundings,

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the member of a modest working family, He bore Himself always with great dignity and assurance. Though He enjoyed no special advantages as a child, either in education or employment, His entire philosophy and outlook on life were the highest standards of human conduct ever set before mankind. Though He had no vast economic assets, political power, or military might, no other person ever made such an enormous impact on the world's history. Because of Him, millions of people across almost twenty centuries of time have come into a life of decency and honor and noble conduct.

Not only was He gentle and tender and true but also righteous, stern as steel, and terribly tough on phony people.

He was magnificent in His magnanimous spirit of forgiveness for fallen folk but a terror to those who indulged in double talk or false pretenses.

He came to set men free from their own sins, their own selves, their own fears. Those so liberated loved Him with fierce loyalty.

It is this One who insists that He was the Good Shepherd, the understanding Shepherd, the concerned Shepherd who cares enough to seek out and save and restore lost men and women.

He never hesitated to make it quite clear that when an individual once came under His management and control there would be a certain new and unique relationship between Him and

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them. There would be something very special about belonging to this particular Shepherd. There would be a distinct mark upon the man or woman that differentiated him or her from the rest of the crowd.

The day I bought my first thirty ewes, my neighbor and I sat on the dusty corral rails that enclosed the sheep pens and admired the choice, strong, well-bred ewes that had become mine. Turning to me he handed me a large, sharp, killing knife and remarked tersely, “Well, Phillip, they’re yours. Now you’ll have to put your mark on them.”

I knew exactly what he meant. Each shepherd has his own distinctive earmark which he cuts into one of the ears of his sheep. In this way, even at a distance, it is easy to determine to whom the sheep belongs.

It was not the most pleasant procedure to catch each ewe in turn and lay her ear on a wooden block, then notch it deeply with the razor-sharp edge of the knife. There was pain for both of us. But from our mutual suffering an indelible lifelong mark of ownership was made that could never be erased. And from then on every sheep that came into my possession would bear my mark.

There is an exciting parallel to this in the Old Testament. When a slave in any Hebrew household chose, of his own free will, to become a lifetime

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member of that home, he was subjected to a certain ritual. His master and owner would take him to his door, put his ear lobe against the door post and with an awl puncture a hole through the ear. From then on he was a man marked for life as belonging to that house.

For the man or woman who recognizes the claim of Christ and gives allegiance to His absolute ownership, there comes the question of bearing His mark. The mark of the cross is that which should identify us with Him for all time. The question is—does it?

Jesus made it clear when He stated emphatically, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Basically what it amounts to is this: A person exchanges the fickle fortunes of living life by sheer whimsy for the more productive and satisfying adventure of being guided by God.

It is a tragic truth that many people who really have never come under His direction or management claim that “The Lord is my shepherd.” They seem to hope that by merely admitting that He is their Shepherd somehow they will enjoy the benefits of His care and management without paying the price of forfeiting their own fickle and foolish way of life.

One cannot have it both ways. Either we belong or we don't. Jesus Himself warned us that there

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would come a day when many would say, “Lord, in Your name we did many wonderful things,” but He will retort that He never knew us as His own.

It is a most serious and sobering thought which should make us search our own hearts and motives and personal relationship to Him.

Do I really belong to Him?

Do I really recognize His right to me?

Do I respond to His authority and acknowledge His ownership?

Do I find freedom and complete fulfillment in this arrangement?

Do I sense a purpose and deep contentment because I am under His direction?

Do I know rest and repose, besides a definite sense of exciting adventure, in belonging to Him?

If so, then with genuine gratitude and exaltation I can exclaim proudly, just as David did, “The Lord is my shepherd!” and I’m thrilled to belong to Him, for it is thus that I shall flourish and thrive no matter what life may bring to me.