



## **“Our Safety”**

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May 3, 2020

### **Scripture (NKJV):**

#### **Psalm 23**

**23** The LORD *is* my shepherd;  
I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside the still waters.

<sup>3</sup> He restores my soul;  
He leads me in the paths of righteousness  
For His name’s sake.

<sup>4</sup> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
For You *are* with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
You anoint my head with oil;  
My cup runs over.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
All the days of my life;  
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.

### **Sermon:**

I’ve been studying up on sheep.  
According to sheep herders, they are loveable, but sorry beasts.

They’ve been connected to humans, as animals of value, since sometime between 8,000-11,000 BCE, but they are not bright at all.

They need a lot of care.

1. If you leave a flock of sheep alone to graze in one spot, they will completely denude the pasture. They will eat everything, and even paw up the roots to eat them.
2. They will follow the same path with such relentless regularity that they can create huge gullies over time.
3. They collect blow flies and other pests in their skin and faces and have no way to remove them except rubbing up against a bush or tree. Their wool however makes this less helpful. If the bugs are bad, the sheep will run around in a panic, stamp restlessly, wave their heads desperately to keep the flies away. They will lose weight, get sick, sometimes die.
4. They are known to roll onto their backs, and get stuck that way. They lie helpless as a bug, kick frantically, then run out of air, and vultures, cougars and other prey look for that, knowing they are an easy target then.
5. They will eat anything, including poisonous plants. Out here in the American west, blue and white camas can kill a lamb with just a few bites.
6. They were developed in semi-arid regions of the world, specifically Mesopotamia, so they don't need lots of water, but when they are really thirsty, they run desperately to water, and will drink anything, including dirty water that will give them debilitating diseases from flukes and amoebas.
7. Sheep have no effective defenses against prey. They have no armor, no scales, no poisons. They aren't fast, either.

In learning all this, I have learned that sheep really, really need their sheep herders!

1. Sheep herders keep them moving to fresh pasture so they do not destroy the land.
2. They must literally pull up poisonous plants from a pasture before they lead the sheep in to fresh pasture.
3. Sheep herders lead them from home range, to summer range, in valleys where there is water, moving day after day towards fresh pasture. In summer, broad table lands are best. There, the sheep will give rich milk, and the bees make honey from the abundance of flowers.
4. Sheep herders protect them from predators, using the club or rod, as a defensive weapon, and the staff, to guide the sheep gently and avoid dangerous places, or pull them out of a tight spot.
5. Using a variety of oils and liniments smeared on their heads, sheep herders keep the sheep free of dangerous pests, especially those that try to get into their eyes and noses.

I think you can see where this quick lesson in animal husbandry is going?

Isaiah the prophet put it unflinchingly: "All we, like sheep, have gone astray."

That is easy to do. For sheep. For humans.

David, who is credited with composing this psalm, simply declares that the Lord is his shepherd. Owns him, cares for him, leads him.

Jesus declares he is “the Good Shepherd”.

He is willing to leave the 99 to look for the lost one.

He is willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

The sheep herder is absolutely crucial to survival.

Do we want to acknowledge this?

Do we want to acknowledge how helpless we are?

Most often not.

It isn't particularly complimentary to be compared to a sheep; as I said before, they aren't so bright, and they need a lot of care.

We are humans not sheep, and we like to think we are pretty bright, and clever, and brave and strategic and self-reliant, and capable.

But this pandemic has brought home to us, yet again, just how needy we are; how helpless we are, how destructive and thoughtless we are, how desperate we actually are, for guidance and a right path.

Has it made us turn to our Good Shepherd?

Has it made us grateful for the care of the LORD, our sheep herder?

Have we been humbled enough to recognize we need help?

Perhaps.

Maybe now we realize we need the guidance, the support, the wise leading of our God, not our own puny selves and misplaced egos.

Maybe now we see ourselves as a flock together, not as competitors.

Maybe now we see ourselves, truly, and recognize that we need greater wisdom to not destroy our planet home, or be destroyed by disease and want and predators.

Maybe, on the other side of this pandemic, we will recognize that the One who made us, and our planet home, is our Owner.

And owns us with love and compassion.

Is our Safe Keeper, dedicated to our well-being.

If we belong to God, if we recognize Jesus as our Sheep herder...

Then, we need not be dismayed by dark valleys, or enemies, or hunger or thirst.  
Do not get huffy with me, saying I am naïve...I know that this life is full of dark valleys, and enemies and hunger and thirst.  
We will not escape death.  
We will face sorrow.  
There is suffering.

But I know this, too...the Good Shepherd has given his life for us, the sheep of the planet.  
And there is no separating us from our Sheep Herder.  
There is no end to the care and concern of this Risen One, our Good Shepherd.

There is the generous offer of safety and of plenty, if we accept the reality that we are sheep-like; if we acknowledge our need of God's wisdom and God's care.

This pandemic is humbling.  
It is throwing back in our faces our errors, our arrogance, our stupidity, our blindness. Our unhealthy, even poisonous hungers of greed, power, pride, paranoia.

Are we humbled enough to learn a new lesson, live a new way, come together, rather than tear one another apart?

I hope so; oh, how I hope so!

The shepherding presence of God, hovering over the earth, and upon the earth and in the earth...is with us.

Caring and guiding, urging and providing. Providing the vision of another way to live upon the earth. Down through all ages, never abandoning us. No matter how foolish and sheep-like we act...

Ok, we are not sheep.  
However, we need to find a balance between our cleverness and our lack of vision and understanding.  
Between our industriousness and creativity, and the power of rest and contentment.

This earth is the House of the Lord, let us take our cleverness and our humility, our love and our compassion, and together, find the way that the Good Sheep Herder leads us; to dwell here in peace, with goodness and mercy all the days of our lives.  
Amen.