

This lesson will introduce a series of lessons from the familiar text recorded in Psalm 23. I trust over the next several Sunday evenings, you will come to better appreciate your relationship to the Lord by observing the nature of sheep and the shepherd. (*Psa 23:1*) ***A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*** The text begins with The Lord is MY Shepherd, so it is fitting that we consider the question, who is the Lord and does He have adequate credentials to be my Shepherd - my manager - my owner? 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?

Jesus the Christ when He was among men once declared, ***I am the good Shepherd (John 10:11).*** If we pause to reflect on the person of Christ - on His power and upon His achievements - suddenly like David we will be glad to state proudly, "The Lord — He is my Shepherd!"

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. So when the simple statement is made that "The Lord is my Shepherd," it immediately implies a practical relationship between a human being and his Master/Maker. (*Gen 1:26 KJV*) ***And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.*** This thought alone gives great purpose and meaning to our short life span on earth. And the greater, the wider, the more majestic my concept is of the Christ, then the more vital will be my relationship to Him.

David in this Psalm is NOT speaking 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!

I have read about raising sheep and in so doing discovered that there is a great deal of similarity between the raising of goats and sheep, and to a great extent their survival and hardiness depends a lot on the type of man who owns it. Some men were gentle, kind, intelligent, brave and selfless in their devotion to their stock. Others are neglectful. Under one man, sheep would struggle, starve and suffer endless hardship. In another's care they would flourish and thrive contentedly. Their survival depends a lot on the character of their shepherd. Phillip Keller has written several books on the nature of sheep in Psalms 23.

So if the Lord is my Shepherd it would be good to know something of His character and understand something of His ability. Take a walk out at night under the stars and notice His majesty and might. Looking up at the star-filled sky and remember that there are millions such stars and scientist tell us that most are larger than our

sun, which is one of the smallest of the stars in the universe. The planet earth is so minute a speck of matter in space that if it were possible to transport our most powerful telescope to our nearest neighbor star and look back this way, the earth could not be seen. *(Psa 19:1) The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork.*

All this ought to be a bit humbling and drain the "ego" from a man as he 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, humbly calls Himself "My Shepherd" and invites me to consider myself as one of His sheep - His special object of affection and attention. *{John 10:14} I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.* Who better could care for me?

He is the Son of God that 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. It is He who brought me into being and no one is better able to understand or care for me. **IN ONE ASPECT, I BELONG TO HIM SIMPLY BECAUSE HE CREATED ME** as the object of His own affection.

In a **SECOND VERY REAL AND VITAL SENSE, I TRULY BELONG TO HIM BECAUSE HE HAS BOUGHT ME.** Christ demonstrated at Calvary the deep passion of His heart to have men come under His benevolent care. He Himself absorbed the penalty for man's sin. *All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).* Now understand that I was expensive. I cost the incredible price of His life and shed blood. Therefore, He was entitled to say, *I am the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. (John 10:11).* So there is the realization that we have been bought with a price.

I recall quite clearly how in my first venture with goats, the question of paying a price for my does was so important as that determined how many we bought. After we got them home to a snow covered January night, they belonged to me only by virtue of the fact that I paid hard cash for them. Because of this, I felt in a special way that they were a part of me and I a part of them. There was an immediate identity involved, which made those first four does exceedingly precious to us.

But the day I bought them I also realized that this was but the first stage in a long, lasting endeavor in which, I would, as their owner, have to continually care and provide for them if they were to flourish and prosper. Sheep/goats do not "just take care of themselves" as some might suppose. Sheep particularly require more attention 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 this series of lessons. In spite of our fears and our stubbornness and in spite of our perverse habits and adverse characteristics, Christ chooses us, buys us, calls us by name, he makes us His own and delights in caring for us. He is our shepherd.

It is this aspect which is really the **THIRD REASON** why we recognize His ownership of us. **HE LITERALLY LAYS HIMSELF OUT FOR US.**

- He is ever interceding for us;
- He is ever guiding us by His inspired word;
- He is ever working on our behalf to ensure that we will benefit from His care.

Little wonder that David, as should we, took pride in belonging to the Good Shepherd.

Phillip Keller tells of a sheep ranch in his district which was operated by a tenant sheep-man. Of this man he said, *"He ought never to have been allowed to keep sheep. His stock was 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 of pathetic people the world over who have not known what it is to belong to the Good Shepherd. How amazing it is that some people so strongly opposes and rejects the claims of Christ on their lives. Some 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. An unbiased look at His life quickly reveals a person of enormous compassion and incredible integrity. He was the most balanced and most beloved being ever to enter the society of men.

- Though born amid most disgusting surroundings, 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. He is magnificent in His spirit of forgiveness for the obedient, but a terror to those who indulged in double talk or false pretenses. He came to set men free from their own sins, and those so liberated ought to love 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. Jesus makes it quite clear that when an individual comes under His management and control there would be a certain new and unique relationship between Him and 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 them from the rest of the crowd.

Not long after we bought our first goats, we were introduced to the practice of tattooing. It was not the most pleasant procedure, but it was a necessary one if you register your animals. A tattoo is a permanent mark embedded on the inside of the goat's ear. There was pain for both the animal and me, but from our mutual suffering a permanent lifelong mark of ownership was made that could never be erased. *(John 13:34-35) A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. {35} By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.* Love for one another is the identification marks of the Good Shepherd's sheep.

When a slave in any Hebrew household chose, of his own freewill, to become a lifetime 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 their allegiance to His absolute ownership, there comes the question of bearing His mark. No we don't have a hole punched in our ear but instead we bare the mark of the cross. The committed life we live should identify us with Him for all time, but does it? Jesus

stated clearly (*Luke 9:23*) *And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.*

There are some who really have never come under His direction or management that claim "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 foolish way of life. One cannot have it both ways. Either we belong or we don't. Jesus Himself warned us that there would come a day when many would say, "*Lord, in Your name we did many wonderful things,*" but He will report that He never knew them 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? Is he really my shepherd? 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.

If not, then let me encourage you to make that commitment tonight. INVITATION