

Introducing the Creator-Shepherd

The Song, Part 1

Psalm 23:1-2

One of my recent journals had as its cover title, 2013 News of the Year.

It's the only journal I subscribe to – an evangelically directed World Magazine – and in this issue it cataloged the top news stories of just the past 12 months with full page, full color photographs . . . and all I could say after reading it was – if there was ever a time when the world was in desperate need of a leader . . . of direction . . . for help . . . and sanctuary . . . it is today.

One full page photograph showed Kenyan soldiers searching for gunmen at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi – gunmen who caused panic and terror for hours, killing 67 shoppers and wounding 200 more – a mall where members of our own missions team had shopped only weeks earlier.

Another photograph showed the aftermath of homemade bombs exploding at the Boston Marathon finish line, killing 3 and maiming and wounding nearly 300 more.

Color pictures showing the conflicts in Syria and in Egypt, where the overthrow of their president brought about – and continues to escalate in rioting and bloodshed.

Other conflicts around the world attracted everyone's attention; whether it was the ongoing nuclear ambitions of Iran or the growth of Al Qaeda in Algeria.

North Korea's new president, brazenly sentenced an American missionary to 15 years of hard labor; and in case Christians didn't get the message in the west, he also ordered the public executions of 80 people for a variety of offenses, including personally owning a Bible.

Battles of a different sort have occurred in our own borders – but they have a common theme – we may be allowed to own a Bible, but our culture is battling over whether or not we will follow it;

- One northern state passed a bill defining personhood to begin in the womb - a measure that will be voted on in the coming year;
- Many states in the country are currently or potentially poised to join those states that already have redefined the core definition of marriage; a man can now have a husband and a woman can now have a wife;
- Still more, this past year, the Governor of one state signed into law the banning of any kind of counseling for minors that attempts to convert them to heterosexuality;
- Meanwhile, among the heterosexuals: one obscene dance performance depicting male/female sodomy at last year's music awards show was cheered by all the attendees; in fact, it later broke the record for the greatest number of views online – 19.3 million – in one single day.¹
- And yet another milestone in recent months – the number of couples choosing to cohabitate in our country exceeded the number of those choosing to get married

I find it tragically ironic that the church has spoken out against homosexual union but virtually nothing about heterosexual fornication.

The Bible is really clear on both counts, isn't it?

Frankly, the world is staggering around, without direction, literally wandering into more and more self-deceived and confusing arenas of life.

And the mainline church is just as confused.

The world is literally without a leader . . . a leader who knows the way to true satisfaction and genuine purpose and real meaning and lasting hope. I find it fascinating that some of the best wisdom for life came from the poetic inspiration of a teenager.

Not an old man with wise life-experiences, but a passionate young person who was inspired by the recent anointing of the Holy Spirit.

One of the first Songs composed by David is one of his most famous.

It effectively asks the question – do you have a leader – do you know who your Shepherd is – and are you following the right one?

Turn to *Psalm chapter 23* and discover all over again – or perhaps for the first time – this song is nothing more than the evidence of why you really ought to follow *this* Shepherd.

He’s going to be the only One capable of pulling off all the things you really need in life . . . and beyond.

As you’re turning there, you know as well as I do, that *Psalm 23* is probably the most often quoted Psalm at funerals. But in my opinion, it isn’t so much about dying . . . as it is about living.

The Psalm can be divided easily enough into 2 sections; the first section is from *verse 1 through verse 3*; you could write into the margin of your Bible the word **Provision** – these three verses reveal the provision of the Shepherd.

The second section is from verse 4 through verse 6 and again, one word summarizes David’s lyrics – it’s the word **Protection**.

And David will vividly describe the protection of his Shepherd.

The Provision of the Shepherd

Before David does anything, He introduces us to the Shepherd, by name.

Notice, *The Lord is my shepherd*.

David uses the name, Yahweh . . . the great Old Testament name which literally means, “I am who I am.”

The transliteration of Yahweh is Jehovah. The name refers to God’s self-sufficiency and timelessness.ⁱⁱ

He doesn’t need anything. He doesn’t need to be served – it’s our privilege to do so; He doesn’t need to be helped – it’s our greatest honor to co-labor with Him; He doesn’t need to be worshipped –

although it is our highest act and attitude – He doesn’t need anything.

Yahweh is self-sufficient, self-contented, self-sustaining.

There’s almost a play on words here in this opening statement – the God who doesn’t need anything is about to take care of everything *we* need.

The grace and humility bound up in this opening word is staggering.

David effectively writes, “The great all-powerful, self-sustaining, timeless God . . . has stepped into my time and my space and has become my personal Leader.

The creator God is interested in my puny little world.

And the more we know about world, the smaller we become.

By the way, go online sometime and search for a size comparison of some of our planets and stars – the pictures and comparisons are staggering.

For example, if you compare the size of earth to the sun, we look like a marble and the sun looks like a bowling ball.

But compare the sun to Arcturus (the brightest star in the northern hemisphere) and the sun will be the size of a marble and Arcturus the size of a bowling ball . . . and the earth and tiny speck.

Just look at our nearest star, Alpha Centauri. It happens to be 186 times bigger than planet earth. Take a look at it through that telescope you got for Christmas.

But keep in mind that if you took your telescope with you and you traveled to Alpha Centauri, and then you turned your telescope back toward earth, you wouldn’t be able to see it.

We’re just too small.

And by the way, if you did decide to travel to our nearest star – the nearest star – you’re going to need to travel at the speed of light because it’ll take you over 4 years to get there. But that’s if you can travel at 186,000 miles per second – that means you’re traveling at just under 700,000 miles an hour – you can just about do that on Penney Road . . . in a Chevy Pickup.

Well if you *can* travel that fast, and you actually get to Alpha Centauri, when you reach that star, you will have barely gone out into our universe, because there are 400 billion stars more beyond . . . in this galaxy alone.

And I have read that our galaxy actually isn’t all that big. There are spiral galaxies out there with more than a trillion stars, and giant elliptical galaxies

with 100 trillion stars.ⁱⁱⁱ

Isn't it comforting to know that the number of stars out there is actually higher than our national debt? That *is* comforting.

According to estimates I checked on this week, the number of galaxies now – not stars – but galaxies, is somewhere around 200 billion . . . and by the way, with every new astronomical invention, that number grows even higher.

The further out we can see . . . guess what . . . there are more galaxies!

Do we know how many there are? Can we ever number them? No . . . but David will write in ***Psalm 147:1, God knows the number of the stars.***

And He doesn't just have them counted – He created them; the prophet Isaiah writes, ***“Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars . . . He calls them all by name (Isaiah 40:26).”***

That Creator God – who has named every one of those stars literally bends down as it were and willingly and graciously cares about the smallest detail of your life.

Casting all your cares upon Him, because He cares about you (1 Peter 5:7).

Here's young David, lying out at night under a Bethlehem sky – looking up – and saying to himself as he composes one of his first hymns of praise – that all powerful, all-sufficient God, is my Shepherd.

By the way, the rest of this Psalm gets easy – if you get the Shepherd right.

You miss this Leader . . . You deny this Creator . . . you avoid this Shepherd and none of Psalm 23 can be a promise to you.

Everything hinges on this first phrase.

Notice further in verse 1, “The Lord is . . .”

Not the Lord *will be* . . . the Lord *used to be* . . . I'm going to try Him out for a few months and if it works out He just might be.

This Song doesn't work for those who want to sing, “The Lord almost is my shepherd . . . the Lord later on will be my Shepherd – I'm thinking about it.

No, ***The Lord is*** – present tense!

Notice this isn't only present tense, its possessive terminology.

The Lord is my – shepherd. This powerful God is my personal guide.

David doesn't start out by singing, “The Lord is my father's Shepherd . . . the Lord is my uncle's Shepherd . . .”

That won't cut it.

I met with a couple not long ago and after sharing with them the gospel of Christ and the claims of

Christ over their lives, I asked them if they'd like to commit their lives to Christ then and there.

The woman said, “Yes, I'd like to pray right now and ask Christ to save me and commit my life to him.” And her husband looked down and said, “I don't really want to do that.”

When they walked out of my office, she had a Shepherd, and he was still wandering.

David doesn't encourage us to sing, “The Lord is my wife's Shepherd or my husband's Shepherd . . . oh, let me tell you about my grandfather – he used to be a devout Christian – no question about it – the Lord was His Shepherd.”

Great! But not good enough.

God doesn't have grandchildren.

As wonderful as they are – grandchildren are great aren't they? I mean, they are so much better than . . . those other people.

David is delivering to us the promises of God's provision – but mark this – all of these promised provisions are contingent upon a personal possession.

David opening song is, “The Lord is mine!”

How tragic to see a bumper sticker this past week . . . the words read, “Earth doesn't belong to us, we belong to earth.”

You belong to this planet? Is that all?

This round speck in an incomprehensible universe. David says, “I belong to the Creator . . . of the universe.”

David moves on to end this introduction – The Lord is my shepherd.

David's music immediately becomes a metaphor. He effectively says he's a sheep and the Lord's a shepherd.

Again, the grace of God is astounding.

In Israel, as in other ancient cultures, a shepherd's work was considered the lowest rung on the ladder. If a family needed a shepherd and couldn't afford to hire one, the youngest child, like David, got saddled with the job.

One Bible scholar wrote, “Shepherds had to live with their sheep twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Their task was unending. Day and night, summer and winter, in fair weather and during lightning storms and freezing nights they fed, guided and protected their sheep. Who in their right mind would choose to be a shepherd?”^{iv}

Throughout Old Testament scripture, God willingly portrays Himself as a Shepherd. And in the New Testament, the Lord Jesus doesn't shy away

from it at all, in fact, He openly declared, *I am the good Shepherd (John 10:11)*.

And my guess is, the Lord calls Himself our Shepherd because we are most like sheep.

From what I've seen and learned and read, sheep:

- are entirely defenseless – all they can do is run;
- they lack any sense of direction so if they wander away, they can't find their way back;
- while other animals lick or scrape or roll around in the grass to clean themselves off, sheep don't clean themselves and seem content to stay dirty;
- they follow each other even into dangerous situations
- they are not discerning in what they eat – often to their own peril
- other animals have a sense of smell to find food or water, but sheep depend entirely upon their shepherd for without him they will be lost.^v

In fact, the biblical metaphor for wandering away is when people act like sheep.

Isaiah the prophet said, *All we like sheep have gone astray, every one of us have turned to our own way (Isaiah 53:6, paraphrased)*

David himself would later write in Psalm 119:176, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep."

The human race is in desperate need of a Shepherd. We will follow just about anything and just about anyone.

So David begins by saying, "Listen, everybody . . . you need to know who my Shepherd is . . . it's the Lord . . . and he implies, by what he sings throughout this Song, you need to make Him your Shepherd too . . . in fact, why would you want anybody else?"

Now David ends *verse 1* by saying the unbelievable. *"The Lord is my shepherds, I shall not want."* What did he mean?

One little boy was quoting this verse to his teacher and he got the words turned around as he said, "The Lord is my shepherd, and that's all I want."

Frankly, that's a great paraphrase of this text.

I shall not want . . . that is, I lack nothing that I truly need.

Now watch this, left to themselves sheep lack *everything!*

But when the Lord is your shepherd – the One who needs *nothing* is omnisciently capable of

knowing and then delivering what *He* knows you need.

So you can say at any given moment in life – whatever I don't have, God knows it isn't something I need to have; and whatever I do have, God knows, for whatever reason, I needed to have it.

Now David moves into a description of the Shepherds Provision.

And you and I are only going to be able to understand this description if you and I understand what it means to be a sheep.

Notice as David sings in *verse 2*. *"He makes me lie down in green pastures."*

What does that mean? He makes me lie down.

Is that like the way I used to tell my kids, now you go back to your bedroom and lie down, it's past your bedtime.

We had such a time with our twins when they were toddlers – like sheep they influenced one another; one would figure out how to do something and then teach the other how to transgress the law.

Keeping them in their cribs was the challenge . . . no need for an alarm in the morning either. There they are!

I remember commenting about our challenge in church one Sunday – way back then – to one of the men in our church who also had twins – twin girls – and he said, "Stephen, I've got the solution." I said, "What is it?" He said, "I just put a screen door on top of the crib – hinges and all. When we want 'em out we just open the screen door."

I thought . . . that's brilliant.

It's probably illegal too . . . so don't do it.

Is David saying here that with enough threatening and a few spankings, God eventually makes us lie down?

What if we want to run around in the pasture some more – or get up and get a drink of water – 10 times.

Is it a matter of training?

When our children were little, we had trouble with our dog and – he was unmanageable and frankly a bit dangerous around the kids, especially during thunder storms . . . so off to the pound he went to be adopted by somebody else.

I announced to my wife and our kids . . . no more dogs . . . that's it . . . too much trouble . . . expense . . . no more dogs.

A couple of weeks after I made that law of the Medes and Persians, a stray little Beagle puppy followed my boy's home.

They had been to the park, playing soccer with their friends . . . the puppy didn't have a collar . . . it was actually tangled up in the soccer net at the park . . . they untangled him from the net; it was obviously abandoned; it was hungry and thirsty; it was limping as it followed my boys home . . . it would have made a great movie.

My wife called me at the office and said, "Honey, I know you've said no more dogs . . . but let me tell you what happened and then I'm fine with whatever decision you want to make."

Submission isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Of course we kept the puppy. When I got home we had a family consultation out in the garage to name this puppy. I had been preaching most recently on the God's sovereignty and the fact that there is no such thing as luck – never mind that, they chose to name the puppy Lucky! Lucky. I suggested Providence – or, the Sovereignty of God.

Nope – it was . . . Lucky!

A few days later I could hear my daughter on the front porch trying to teach it how to sit. I could hear her repeating, "Sit, Lucky . . . sit!"

And I could tell it wasn't working. So I went out and coached her how to push down on his little rump until he sat down while she commanded him to sit at the same time – I reassured her that eventually Lucky would connect the dots.

Is that what David is referring to here? *He makes me to lie down in green pastures* . . . "lie down . . . ah, ah, aaah . . . lie down!" What David is saying here is that God makes it *possible* for me to lie down.

If you pick up a book by Phillip Keller, a former shepherd and a newer book by Timothy Laniak, a man who spent time with Middle Eastern shepherds and came out with his wonderful journal of reflections just a few years ago – I've learned from their writings that sheep refuse to lie down until several things are taken care of – and they all have to be taken care of by the shepherd.

1. First, sheep won't lie down if they're hungry

They'll stay standing . . . foraging . . . unsatisfied . . .

Which is why David adds this line in *verse 2* about lying down in *green pastures*.

In other words, the sheep are lying down because they are in green pastures.

And green pastures didn't just happen by chance.^{vi}

Keller writes, "Green pastures were the product of tremendous labor, time and skill in land use. Green pastures were the result of clearing rough, rocky land; of tearing out brush and roots and stumps; of deep plowing and careful soil preparation; of seeding and planting special grains; of irrigating with water and caring. If the sheep were to enjoy green pastures amid the brown, barren hills [of Bethlehem], the shepherd had a tremendous job to accomplish."^{vii}

In other words, hungry sheep never lie down – they stay on their feet, foraging, searching for one more mouthful.

What matters more than anything else in this text is who your Shepherd is!

David is effectively saying, "I can lie down because my soul isn't hungry; my heart is satisfied!"

2. Secondly, sheep won't lie down if they're afraid.

Keller writes that sheep are so timid and easily panicked that even a stray jackrabbit suddenly bounding from behind a bush can stampede a whole flock. When one startled sheep runs in fright, a dozen others will bolt with it in blind fear, not waiting to see what frightened them.

Any fear . . . any suspicion of coyotes, cougars, bears or even dogs – and the sheep will stay standing, ready to do what they can only do – run!

Again, the solution is the shepherd. Keller would write that to dispel their fear was to simply arrive on the scene. As soon as the sheep saw their shepherd – and knew he was nearby – they would settle down . . . and even lie down.

The analogy is obvious, isn't it?

In the Christian's life there is no substitute for the awareness of our Shepherd nearby. There is no substitute for walking in communion with Jesus Christ.

There is no solution like trusting and believing and applying the promise of Jesus Christ, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" So (the writer of *Hebrews* says) *we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not fear; what can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13:6)*

3. Thirdly – sheep won't lie down if they're thirsty.

David adds at the end of *verse 2, this interesting phrase, He leads me beside still waters.*

Sheep won't get close to running, fast-moving water. If they fall or get pushed into the water, their heavy coat of wool can become saturated and pull them under.^{viii}

Keller adds that when sheep are thirsty they become restless and set out in search of water. If there is no good shepherd to lead them to a supply of quiet, clean, pure water, they will drink from polluted pot holes and pick up internal parasites, liver flukes and diseases germs.^{ix}

Once again – the praise of David's song is in honor of a good Shepherd who takes the time and effort to damn up some rushing stream so that a quiet pool of clear and clean water is available.

That same Shepherd who promises us as His sheep to bring to Him our ***hunger and thirst after righteousness, we shall be satisfied (Matthew 5:6)***

In other words, all the other shepherds of the world will lead you to unsatisfying, unrewarding, diseased, polluted water.

So the world is filled with wandering, lost people. There are broken homes, broken hearts, broken lives, broken dreams – no purpose – struggling to survive in a desert land; thirsty and hungry. They have lost their way and they're drinking diseased water.

Matthew tells us that Jesus, ***Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)***

You know what our mission in life is? To join David in saying to our world – hey, I don't know who you're following, but you really ought to know about *my* shepherd.

And listen, the grass is actually greener over here! So come over here and let me introduce you to my Shepherd.

I remember years ago hearing the story of man in the early 1930's who was on the side of the road, under the hood, trying to get his Model A to start again. A beautiful, chauffeur driven car pulled off the road near him and a slight, well-dressed older gentleman got out and walked over and asked the man if he could take a look under the hood. After a few minutes, he told the man that the car could be started . . . sure enough, it cranked right up. The appreciative man couldn't contain his curiosity. He blurted out, "Say, you don't look like a mechanic . . . how'd you know how to fix my car?" The man quietly responded, "Well, my name is Henry Ford . . . and I invented your car . . . I know how it's supposed to work."

No matter what the world says . . . no matter what the courts decide . . . no matter what your professors teach . . . no matter what that religious system advises . . . God created you . . . your creator God invented you.

And He knows how your life is supposed to work.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/5/2014 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2014 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved.

i Excerpted from *World Magazine*, January 11, 2014, p. 43

ii James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms: Volume 1* (Baker Books, 1994), p. 207

iii <http://www.universetoday.com/102630/how-many-stars-are-there-in-the-universe/#ixzz2pO2HR87r>

iv Ibid, p. 208

v Expanded from Charles R. Swindoll, *Living Beyond the Daily Grind, Volume 1* (Word Publishing, 1988), p. 69

vi Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Zondervan, 1970), p. 45

vii Ibid

viii Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Falling Into Greatness* (Thomas Nelson, 1984), p. 53

ix Keller, p. 50