

Lesson 2

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Historically and biblically shepherding has never been a preferred profession - **the** job to have. Most fathers did not dream of their sons wanting to become shepherds when they grew up. Shepherding was actually looked on with disdain. Remember when Joseph and his brothers were united again in Egypt and Joseph advised his brothers to downplay the fact that they tended sheep? The Egyptians were agricultural in the sense of farming crops but they considered sheep unclean, and therefore detested shepherds. (Genesis 46) When Samuel went to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the next King of Israel, David wasn't even considered by his family as a possibility because he was only a shepherd. When God called Moses to deliver the Israelites he was already an educated man and trained military leader. Yet we see God preparing him for the job by sending him into the wilderness to tend smelly, stubborn sheep for 40 years.

Throughout scripture, both Old and New Testament, God uses shepherding to describe his relationship to us. The idea that the Lord is a Shepherd to His people was first mentioned way back in Genesis 49:24 where Moses called the Lord the Shepherd. The Creator of the universe cares about us, who are stubborn, stiff-necked, and rebellious, just like sheep. Sheep are basically helpless creatures who cannot survive long without a shepherd to depend on totally. Likewise we are totally dependent on the Lord to protect, guide, and care for us. Sheep are not the brightest animals; they do not learn well and are extremely hard to train. They don't have good eyesight, nor do they hear well. They are slow so they cannot escape predators; they have no camouflage or weapons of defense like claws, sharp hooves, or powerful jaws. They are easily frightened and become easily confused. In fact they have been known to plunge blindly off a cliff following one after another. Shepherds like David faced incredible dangers caring for their sheep, often putting their own lives at risk, battling wild animals who threatened the flock.

Like sheep, we too need a shepherd. Men are spiritually blind and lost in their sin. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us. He searches for us when we are lost (Luke 15:4-6) and saves us to show us the way to eternal life. (Luke 19:10) We can be like sheep, consumed with worry and fear at times, following after one another. By not listening for or obeying the Shepherd's voice we can easily wander or be led astray. That is why it is so important we stay close to the true Shepherd.

Phillip Keller, in his book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, lists some characteristics of a good shepherd:

1. He knows all of his sheep and all of his sheep know him. In many cases he marks them with a distinct mark. God, like a shepherd, knows everything about you. There are no secrets you can hide from Him. He knows you inside and out and still cares for you in spite of your shortcomings. You are marked as one of His.

2. He never leaves his sheep. He has the skill to bring his sheep to fruitful ground for their nourishment and growth. It is a great encouragement to know my God is always

close at hand. *I will never leave you, or forsake you.* (Hebrews 13:5) As a good shepherd keeps watch over his flock, so our God keeps watch over us.

3. **He has the diligence to watch his sheep, to keep them from straying and bringing them back when they do.** Sheep left to their own devices will stray and unknowingly put themselves into dangerous places. The good shepherd diligently tries to keep that from happening, but when it does he will seek after the one who has wandered and bring him back to the flock. When we stray or wander from our faith, Jesus is there to bring us back.

4. **He will defend his sheep from all dangers.** The shepherd was prepared to protect his sheep from any threat or danger like bears or lions. Our Shepherd protects us from lions, too. If you are living for Jesus, you have taken on the Lord's enemy, Satan. I Peter 5:8 tells us, "*your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.*" We are safe and secure with our Shepherd watching over and protecting us.

5. **He bears with the weak and feeble sheep. He will even carry them on his shoulders when they are too weak to go on.** The Shepherd's love and patience never ran out and he was strong enough to carry the sheep when they couldn't walk. We certainly have those times in our lives, even wondering how God could love us when we are such failures. Sometimes we are weak in our faith or we feel unable or unwilling to do what God has called us to do. We can rest assured that our Shepherd will carry us when we are unable to go on. Paul dealt with his own struggles - his thorn in the flesh - yet said of God in II Corinthians 12:9, *He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."* Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Our Shepherd also shows us mercies that are new everyday. His gift of mercy never runs out, no matter what. One of my favorite verses is Lamentations 3:22-23, *Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.* Our dreams falter and fail; God does not. Our hearts grow weak; His steadfast love is from everlasting to everlasting. Our hopes rise and fall; God's mercies come at their appointed time every morning and they will carry us through each day.

6. **He rejoices when a lost sheep is brought back to the fold. He will even leave the others to find that lost one.** We see in our Shepherd such a tender heart for the lost. Often we forget that His love extends to anyone and everyone who will receive it, thinking some are beyond saving. But He is not willing that one should perish and we, as His followers, should have that same heart for the lost.

David said the "*Lord is MY shepherd*" - he knew the Lord in a very personal way. Spurgeon commented, "The sweetest word of the whole is that monosyllable, 'My.' He does not say, 'The Lord is the shepherd of the world at large, and leadeth forth the multitude as his flock,' but 'The Lord is my shepherd;' if he be a Shepherd to no one else, he is a Shepherd to *me*; he cares for *me*, watches over *me*, and preserves *me*. Before a man can truly say, "**the LORD is my shepherd,**" he must first feel himself to be a sheep by nature, "for he cannot know that God is his Shepherd unless he feels in himself that he has the nature of a sheep." He must relate to a sheep in its foolishness, its dependency, and in the warped nature of its will."

The world teaches a totally different philosophy. "You are the master of your life, so take charge! Take pride in your accomplishments because you did it your way, on your own. Nobody owns you or tells you what to do; you're a slave to no one." This is in direct opposition to acknowledging the Lord is your shepherd, that He owns you. *Know that the Lord, He is God;*

It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. (Psalm 100:3) We have been bought with a price, we have been redeemed - bought back. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. (Acts 20:28)

The first step to true wholeness, *Shalom*, is to acknowledge God's ownership of our lives. Everything we have is His. He is in control and we are not. He is the Good Shepherd and we are His sheep. Trusting God can give us true peace and contentment in the midst of any circumstances but only if we submit to His authority. David's life wasn't perfect and ours aren't either. But like David, we can find true contentment in the fact that the Lord is My Shepherd.

I Shall Not Want...

What David is saying in this little phrase is that we ought to put ourselves in the position of sheep who have total and complete trust in their shepherd to provide everything they need; someone who will look after our smallest needs and lead us to where we need to be. But in our human frailty we so often think we can do all right on our own. We wander away from the path the Lord has set before us.

Since sheep are so needy, they can't help but form a special bond with their shepherd. That's what God has in mind for us. The shepherd is required to know His sheep intimately. He knows the ones who are prone to wander. He knows the weaker ones. He knows the loyal ones. He even knows them all by name. The sheep, by spending time with the Shepherd, begin to know Him as well. They recognize his voice and know his sound and smell. There is a bond between a shepherd and his sheep that isn't found anywhere else. As you come to understand that, being a sheep isn't such a bad thing. In Psalm 23, David wanted us to understand the unique relationship between the Heavenly shepherd and His human sheep. Because we can say "The Lord is My shepherd" we can also say "I shall not want" - "I have everything I need." Dayenu - that is enough.

"Dayenu" is one of the songs of thanksgiving sung at the Passover Seder. In the song, each miracle God performed at the Passover is followed by the word, dayenu. It means "that would be enough." It has many verses which include these:

"If He had split the sea for us, and had not taken us through it on dry land Dayenu, it would have been enough!

If He had taken us through the sea on dry land, and had not drowned our oppressors in it Dayenu, it would have been enough!

If He had drowned our oppressors in it, and had not supplied our needs in the desert for forty years Dayenu, it would have been enough!

If He had supplied our needs in the desert for forty years, and had not fed us the manna Dayenu, it would have been enough!"

If you were asked the question, "How much is enough?, what would your answer be? Our society has convinced us that we always need just a little bit more. Advertising is always stirring in us the idea that we do not yet own enough: we just "need" or "want" one more thing. Yet God offers us complete contentment right now if we keep our focus on Him, rather than the

world. As a loving shepherd to His sheep, He is everything we need. He had given us eternal life and his eternal love and care. He is enough.

The Shepherd and His Tools

The garments worn by the shepherd were pretty basic. He wore a simple tunic of cotton, girded around his body by a leather girdle. Over that he would often wear a fleece coat that was reversible. As mentioned in the book, daytime temperatures could rise to over 100 degrees followed by frost that same night. During the heat of the day, the oil in the sheepskin would protect him. At night, when it got cold, the shepherd would reverse the coat, putting the fleece on the inside to keep him warm. Wearing the fleece coat made him resemble his sheep - he was familiar to them. Philippians 2:5-7 reminds us that Jesus “*made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.*” He took on flesh to become one of us.

The shepherd carried a rod and staff which he used to protect, guide, rescue, and even count the sheep. We will study them in more detail a little later on in the book. As we saw with David, he also carried a sling and a pouch. The sling was often made by the shepherd himself and used as an offensive weapon. In the pouch he carried his small belongings and food; that is where he also carried the smooth stones to use with his sling.

One of the most interesting things he had was a bottle of hog’s oil. The flat, grassy areas so perfect for grazing the sheep often contained holes which hid poisonous brown snakes. These snakes could pop up suddenly and bite the sheep. Knowing this, the shepherd would prepare the field by finding the holes and pouring the thick oil in each one to prevent the snakes from getting out. The sheep didn’t like the smell of the oil so they avoided the holes. As extra protection, the shepherd might also anoint the sheep’s head with oil to prevent the snake’s bite from penetrating in case he missed one.

Completing his tools, the shepherd often carried a flute to pass away the long, lonely hours of tending sheep. It most certainly calmed the sheep to hear him play. We know that David composed many of the Psalms he wrote while watching his flock. And lastly, the shepherd carried an oil lamp made of parchment to light his way in the dark. “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet And a light unto my path.*” (Psalm 119:105)

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

When I understand my relationship with the Lord the way a sheep relates to their shepherd, then I can truly find contentment in this life. I will not lack or need anything more because He is *El Shaddai*, “*the God who is more than enough.*”