

"THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD"
April 21, 1991

TEXT: Psalm 23:1 "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

Except for the Lord's Prayer, there are probably no words anywhere in the Bible that are more familiar --or more beloved-- than the ones I just read. Like many of you, I learned them in my early years of Sunday School, but that does not mean I understood them at the time. After all, I was a city boy, and my only connection with sheep was an occasional leg of lamb which my mother would fix for Sunday dinner. So it did not do a lot for my concept of God to learn that the Lord was my shepherd and that we were the sheep of his hand.

I did not realize, you see that, in Bible times, sheep were rarely butchered. Milk and wool were much more important to a shepherd economy than meat was, and only on very special occasions were the sheep actually slaughtered. Over the years, therefore, shepherds would get to know their sheep and relate to them much as we do to our dogs and cats. And, out of personal concern as much as economic necessity, the good shepherd would meet his flock's needs with great care.

When you know that, the psalm makes a lot more sense. It says, in effect, that just as sheep learn to trust and depend upon the shepherd, we can trust and depend on God. He is the good Shepherd Who takes care of our needs. But that is another thing that used to confuse me. Being unfamiliar with Elizabethan English, I always thought that first verse was unfinished somehow. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" I shall not want what? Only when I was a good deal older did I discover that, in King James' day, the word, "want", often meant "need" and not "desire." And, even today, I probably need to remind myself from time to time that God promises only to provide the things I really need.

And those things fall into three major categories: things which satisfy survival needs, things which satisfy safety needs, and things which satisfy our ultimate need for fellowship with God. Those who are familiar with Abraham Maslow's famous pyramid of values will recognize at least some of them here. And it is interesting to note that something written that many centuries ago should so closely parallel modern psychological theories.

According to Maslow, our most primitive needs, the ones which have to be met before we can even think about anything else, are our needs for survival. And that is where the Shepherd

psalm begins. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters." With that sheep metaphor in mind, those words clearly speak about our physical needs. Sheep, after all, graze standing up. And they lie down only after they have had their fill. To say "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures" means, in effect, that God provides all the good juicy green grass the sheep can use.

And water, of course, is something we all need. We can live only a short time without it. But sheep are strange animals. They will not drink from gurgling water. High up in the hill country of the Holy Land there are many small springs whose waters run down the steep hillsides only to evaporate in the hot Palestinian sun. And, though they need the water, sheep will not drink from those fast flowing streams. So the good shepherd must find a place where there is a natural pool, or else fashion one with his hands, before his sheep can quench their thirst. He literally leads them "beside the still waters."

In the same way, says the psalm, God takes care of our physical needs. That is why Jesus said, "Therefore, I tell you do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on . . . But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matthew 6:25 and 33)

But we need more than food, and water, and shelter. As Maslow pointed out, once those basic needs have been met, then our thoughts inexorably turn to other things. Having assured our survival, at least for a while, we now become concerned for our safety. And here again is where this old familiar psalm takes us. It says, "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

For us, the word, "righteousness", usually has to do with morality, but the Hebrew word, "chesed", really means rightness. And what this verse is saying is that, like the good shepherd, God leads us in the right paths --the ones that take us where we ought to go and take us there in safety. Sometimes, out of necessity, they take us through hardship and, perhaps, even pain. But even then we are safe in God's care. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me."

I am told that there really is a Valley of the Shadow of Death in Palestine. It is south of the Jericho Road leading from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and is a narrow gorge cutting through a range of mountains. Each year the sheep in that region are led through this valley for seasonal grazing. It is four and a half miles long with walls rising 1500 feet in places.

The valley floor is only ten or twelve feet wide and filled with gullies, some of which are seven or eight feet deep. Wild dogs often lurk in the shadows and have to be driven off or killed by the shepherd's rod. And, if one of the sheep should

happen to fall into a gully, the shepherd must use the curved end of his staff to lift it out. Literally, even though the sheep walk through the valley of the shadow of death, they need fear no evil as long as the shepherd is there with his rod and his staff to comfort them and keep them safe.

However, we are not sheep. As human beings, we need more than just survival and safety needs. According to Maslow, beyond survival and safety, man needs love, self-esteem, and self-actualization. These are some of the things that set us apart from the other animals. In the wild, so far as we can tell, the lower animals need none of them. Perhaps pets can develop a need for love and affection, but only man needs self-esteem and self-actualization. Perhaps that is part of what the Bible means when it tells us that God created man in His own image.

At any rate, it is only in fellowship with God that those higher needs are met. Many people look for them in other places, sometimes frantically so. But they are doomed to disappointment. We may deceive ourselves for a while, but in the end we are restless till we find our rest in God. And no amount of activity, or excitement, or pleasure, or pills can ever change that.

But this need God also fulfills, as the psalm reminds us. But, because we are humans and not sheep, the simile changes. Suddenly we find the psalmist talking about a sumptuous banquet. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over." Here is the picture of the perfect host. No little plate of polite teacakes precariously balanced on one knee, but a table fairly sagging under its load of food. And, in true Oriental fashion, the host has anointed his guest with sweet smelling ointments and filled his cup to overflowing.

But at this point the psalm is talking about fellowship, not just food. In Bible days, people would not eat with strangers. Even today, in the Middle East, there is an expression, "You have eaten my salt." And it means, "We are friends." When the psalm speaks in the metaphor of a meal, it means nothing less than the most intimate and lasting friendship. It means that God, Himself, supplies our need for love.

No wonder the psalm culminates with these ecstatic words: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall be at home with God forever." The Good News is that God provides for all our needs. In good times and in bad we are truly safe in God's care. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."