

BIBLE STUDIES - WHO ARE YOU?

SERIES: **NAMES GOD USES FOR CHRISTIANS**
“A good name is to be more desired than great wealth.” (Prov. 22:1)

Lesson #8 **“SHEEP”**

“The Lord is my Shepherd” Psalm 1:1

On one of my tours of Israel I went to the Sheep Market. Shepherds and their flocks were in abundance. Selling, bargaining and trading of sheep was going on at a furious pace. The air was filled with dust as the sheep milled about. The sounds of sheep calling and shepherds bidding made this scene anything but peaceful. Later, I saw shepherds with their flocks in peaceful pastoral scenes scattered about throughout the country.

Today, in our culture, unless you live in a rural setting, you are not likely to see sheep unless you go to a zoo. However, there are many sheep scenes in the Bible and whether you have actually seen a sheep up close or not, you can learn much about sheep and shepherds from biblical accounts.

God's people are often referred to as "sheep." The familiar 23rd Psalm teaches valuable lessons about the Shepherd/sheep relationship. So we naturally turn to it as we talk about God's people being called "sheep." Psalm 23 is the best known, most loved and most often quoted passage in the Bible and yet it is ever new and fresh. Let us concentrate on the word, "sheep" in this Pearl of Psalms as we continue to answer the question: "Who Are You"?

First, we must make a distinction: there is a difference between sheep and goats spiritually as well as biologically. It is the spiritual analogy that Jesus applies when He addresses this difference in Matthew as follows: "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' - "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" (Matthew 25:31-33 & 41)

Sobering words, indeed! Are you a sheep or a goat? Psalm 23 is about sheep. Let us notice three outstanding things about sheep in this Psalm:

First, God's Sheep Enjoy Certain Privileges;
Secondly, God's Sheep Embrace Certain Responsibilities; and
Thirdly, God's Sheep Exhibit Certain Characteristics.

I. GOD'S SHEEP ENJOY CERTAIN PRIVILEGES.

In Psalm 23 there are many wonderful truths to occupy our attention. However, let us concentrate, for the time being, upon the privileges that are mentioned therein:

A. We Have The Privilege Of Being Guided. “He leads me” – verse 2 and 3.

The Shepherd goes before the sheep. It would have been an anomaly in nature for the sheep to go first, and for the shepherd to follow. With their shepherd guiding, the sheep have no need to know the way through the wilderness; it is enough for them that the shepherd knows it. They do not need to know where the green pastures are or where there were quiet resting-places where they might lie down at noon. It is sufficient for the sheep that the shepherd knows, and all that they have to do is follow where he leads. They do not need to worry for they are content because their shepherd knows the way.

Let us transfer this thought to ourselves, and see how the Lord is our Guide. Look at the past, and note how He has guided us. How very little you and I have had to do with it after all! There is far more of the hand of God in our lives than there is of our own hands, if our lives are what they ought to be. It is easy to say that the Lord has been our Shepherd in the past, but it may not be so easy to say that He will be our Shepherd in the future. Yet we have nothing to do with the future except to follow in the path of humble trust in the Lord, and of obedience to his Word. I do not know what the future holds but I know Who holds the future! So I had better trust my Shepherd to guide me.

The sheep before the Shepherd is out of place and out of order but the sheep behind the Shepherd, quietly, patiently, and humbly following Him, is both according to the order of nature and the order of God’s plan. Let us, then, as the Lord’s sheep, learn to take that position and not attempt to usurp the prerogative of our great Shepherd.

B. We Have The Privilege Of Being Guaranteed.

We have the guarantee that our needs will be supplied. Notice the phrase, “I shall not want”:

- I shall not want rest... “He makes me lie down in green pastures.”
- I shall not want refreshment... “He leads me beside the still waters.”
- I shall not want restoration... “He restores my soul.”
- I shall not want guidance... “He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”
- I shall not want companionship in the hours of trial... “Yes, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for You are with me.”
- I shall not want comfort... “Your rod and staff comfort me.”
- I shall not want provision... “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”
- I shall not want care... “You anoint my head with oil.”
- I shall not want satisfaction... “My cup runs over.”
- I shall not want joy... “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”
- I shall not want a home... “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

As the earthly shepherd provides for his sheep, so will God provide for us. We will

find that our Heavenly Shepherd is all-sufficient. His sufficiency is our guarantee!

C. We Have The Privilege Of Being Guarded.

"Your rod and your staff they comfort me." Sheep have enemies: the wolf, lion, bear, etc. The sheep is not safe because it says, "I am stronger than my enemies" or, "I can avoid my enemies." Yet the sheep might feel safe enough if it knew that the shepherd was near.

We know that our Shepherd will never let any of his sheep perish. He has owned us too long, and bought us too dearly, and loved us too well ever to let us go. He said, "It is not the will your Father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." (Matt. 18:14) He also said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." (John 10:27)

So, if you are the Lord's sheep, you have the privileges of being guided, guaranteed and guarded as you follow the Shepherd.

Not only do God's sheep enjoy certain privileges, but, secondly

II. GOD'S SHEEP EMBRACE CERTAIN RESPONSIBILITIES.

A shepherd has duties – sheep have responsibilities.

A. We Have The Responsibility Of Dependence Upon Our Shepherd.

If the sheep could speak, I wonder, as it is eating grass, if it would ever stop all of a sudden, and say to itself, "I wonder what will become of me in the winter! There will be deep snow on the ground, and I'll not be able to get at the grass; how will I be provided for?"

I have never heard of a sheep's woolly head being disturbed in that fashion! Why? It has a shepherd to guarantee its provisions and it depends upon him to provide for all its needs. Yet you and I sometimes do this silly thing, which a sheep would not do. We say, "We cannot imagine what we will do if we are ever in such-and-such circumstances!" Probably, we never will be in such circumstances, yet we keep on worrying about such things.

Many Christians, begin each day by borrowing tomorrow's troubles. God will not give tomorrow's strength until tomorrow comes. God promises "As your days so shall your strength be." (Deut.33:25) Live one day at a time. Meet your troubles one at a time and, as they come, God's grace will make you more than equal to them, and enable you to overcome them. But when in our minds we leap ahead to months and years, and begin to think of a month's troubles, and a year's trials, you will never be able to conquer them. Our first duty, then, as the Lord's sheep, is dependence upon our Shepherd.

B. We Have The Responsibility Of Devotion To Our Shepherd.

In his book, "The Land and the Book" the author, Dr. Thompson, tells us that in the

Middle East, there often is strong affection between the shepherd and his sheep. If he sits down they begin to gravitate to where he is sitting. You never see him without also seeing them close by his side. If he stops, they stop; if he moves, they move. They love the pasture, but they love the shepherd more. They love him, and he loves them. The shepherd is devoted to the sheep and the sheep are devoted to the shepherd.

Are we devoted to our Shepherd similarly? Are we always gravitating toward Him or are we like Peter when he followed Christ at a distance? I hope that you and I, who call Christ our Shepherd, love him much and want to be in His presence.

As God's sheep we enjoy privileges and embrace certain responsibilities. These privileges and responsibilities develop within us certain characteristics.

III. GOD'S SHEEP EXHIBIT CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS.

What are some of the characteristics that are displayed in God's sheep?

A. There Is The Characteristic Of The Sheep's Disposition.

And what is the sheep's general disposition? Gentleness!. Sheep are gentle creatures. I know some who claim to be God's sheep but they seem to me to be more like wolves than sheep. They snap their jaws like wolves do, and their very speech seems to be like a wolf's howl. Nothing pleases them.

A sheep has its likes and its dislikes, but it does not snarl, and snap, and howl, and growl; it is the wolf that does that, but the sheep is of a gentler disposition! It is said of our Shepherd, "When he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not." (1 Peter 2:23) The more we are focusing upon our Shepherd, the more like Him we will be.

B. There Is The Characteristic Of The Sheep's Desire.

We know well the saying, "Birds of a feather flock together." Well, sheep also desire to flock together and so do God's sheep. The Greek word for "church" is "ecclesia" which means "an assembly of called out ones." The fact that the God's sheep flock together with other of God's sheep is a proof that they are indeed God's sheep! Do you prefer to gather with God's church or do you prefer to be with the devil's crowd?

C. There Is The Characteristic Of The Sheep's Diet.

Another evidence of being a sheep is that they are very particular in their feeding. A goat will eat what the sheep would not touch. The sheep must have nothing but that which is sweet and clean to feed upon. If we say, "The Lord is my shepherd," then we should give evidence that that is true by our spiritual diet.

"Thy Word is like a table of rich fare
Supplied with plenty and to spare;
Yes, God's own Word spreads a feast
For every hungry, thirsty guest."

D. There Is The Characteristic Of The Sheep's Discernment.

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice." He went on to say, "A stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers." (John 10:5)
Christ's sheep have a wonderful discerning power by which they recognize when He is speaking to them. They are not deceived by strange voices.

Do we possess these and other characteristics of God's sheep? If you say, "The Lord is my shepherd" these characteristics should be evident in your life. If you cannot say, "The Lord is my Shepherd" and you continue to follow your own ways, they will lead you to destruction. May you come, with childlike confidence, to trust in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the one and only Savior and Shepherd of sinners, for only then will you be able to say in truth, with David, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want."

CONCLUSION

Illust. A young boy was seriously ill with cancer. His parents had taught him Ps. 23:1 in the following way: each finger of his hand represented a word. Finger #1 was "The"; finger #2 was "Lord"; finger #3 was "is"; finger #4 was "my"; and finger #5 was "Shepherd." They told him when he was afraid to hold on to the 4th finger – "my".

One evening they kissed him good night and left the hospital room. The next morning the nurses found him dead. He was holding his 4th finger – "my". Can you say, "The Lord is *my* shepherd"?

Illust. At a gathering of friends, each one was asked to recite some poem, tell some story or give some riddle, etc. When it came to his turn, an actor, who was also somewhat of an orator, arose and eloquently and dramatically quoted Psalm 23. At the conclusion, the group applauded.

Later, an old Christian gentleman, not having anything different to share, arose and, to the surprise of those gathered, announced that he would quote Psalm 23 also. When he finished, all sat in silence, a few shed tears. The old gentleman sat down. The acclaimed actor and orator said, "Friends, I know the 23rd Psalm but our old friend here knows the Shepherd." Do you know only the Psalm or do you also know the Shepherd?

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