

Sermon – The Good Shepherd

Jesus used many analogies in His teachings, using simple, everyday items to illustrate spiritual concepts. For example, Jesus said “*I am the Bread of Life*”, and by eating that bread, we symbolically show that we will follow His steps and live a life modeled after His. He said *I am the Way, the Truth and the Life*.” We must follow His way, living according to the truth of the Bible and thereby gaining eternal life. During one of His talks, Jesus said “*I am the Light of the World*”, showing us that we must no longer walk in the darkness of sin, but in the light of His example. And He told us “*I am the Vine*”, teaching us that without Him we would not bear fruit, but wither and die spiritually. But there is another analogy used by Christ that I would like to explore with you today.

Jesus said “*I am the Good Shepherd...*” Today, I’d like to explore the analogy of this relationship between sheep and their shepherd. We’ll be examining the deep love expressed in the words of perhaps the best known of all Psalms – Psalm 23. And to help us gain a better understanding as we go along our way, I’ll be quoting heavily from the well-known book by author and former shepherd, W. Phillip Keller – “*A Shepherd LOOKS at Psalm 23*”.

Much of the terminology of the Bible is couched in rural language, dealing with outdoor subjects and natural phenomena. The audience to whom these writings were originally addressed were for the most part simple nomadic folk familiar with nature and the country life around them.

Today this is not the case. Most of those who read the Bible today live in a more urban, man-made environment. In our modern world, many of us have lost touch with the details involved in growing crops or raising livestock. As such, we miss much of the truth taught in God’s Word because we are not familiar with such things as sheep, wheat, soil and grapes.

Yet our Lord continually used natural phenomena to explain the supernatural. This should motivate us to study into these things so we don’t miss the points He was trying to make. So let’s begin by turning to **Psalm 23**. We’ll read this short, 6-verse Psalm in its entirety first and then we’ll go over each verse or part of a verse in order. You might want to organize your notes as I have done; **by verse**.

Psalms 23:1-6, ¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴Yea, 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.

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Verse 1: “The LORD is my shepherd;”

The Lord! But who is the Lord? What is His character? Does he have adequate credentials to be my Shepherd – my manager – my owner?

And if he does – how do I come under His control? In what way do I become the object of His concern and diligent care?

A great problem with professing Christians is the tendency to talk in ambiguous generalities. They’ll say, “I’ve given my heart to the Lord” without ever thinking about what that means. “The Lord is my Shepherd” they’ll say, but do they really know who that Lord is?

David, the author of this poem, himself a shepherd and the son of a shepherd, stated explicitly “The Lord is my shepherd.” To whom did he refer?

He referred to the Jehovah/Yahweh, the Eternal, the Lord God of Israel. David’s shepherd was the One who would be born as Jesus, the Christ. This was confirmed later by Jesus Himself when He said “I am the Good Shepherd.” Most professing Christians do not know or will not admit that Jesus was indeed the God of the Old Testament. If you are interested in more information on this subject, please check out the article “*Who Is The God Of The Old Testament?*”, found on our website.

Christ is the Good Shepherd – but who is Christ? Let’s turn to **Colossians 1:15-20**:

Colossians 1:15-20, *"Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether [they be] thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all [things] he might have the preeminence. For it pleased [the Father] that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, [I say], whether [they be] things in earth, or things in heaven. "*

We see it was He who was directly responsible for the creation of all things – both natural and supernatural. If we pause to reflect on the person of Christ – on His power and His achievements – suddenly like King David we will be glad to state proudly, “The Lord – He is my Shepherd!”

When making this simple yet profound statement, it immediately links us with our creator. When David wrote this Psalm, he was not writing from the viewpoint of a shepherd, though he was one, but from the viewpoint of a sheep; one of the flock. He spoke with a strong sense of pride, devotion and admiration. It was as if he were boasting aloud “Look at who is my shepherd – my owner – my manager. The Lord is!”

So with the viewpoint of a sheep, let us continue to explore the goodness bestowed upon us by our Good Shepherd.

Verse 1 cont.: “...I shall not want.”

When all is said and done the welfare of any flock is entirely dependent upon the management afforded them by their owner.

Mr Keller writes: The tenant sheepman on the farm next to my first ranch was the most indifferent manager I had ever met. He was not concerned about the condition of his sheep. His land was neglected. He gave little or no time to his flock, letting them pretty well forage for themselves as best they could, both summer and winter. They fell prey to dogs, cougars and rustlers.

Every year these poor creatures were forced to gnaw away at bare brown fields and impoverished pastures. Every winter there was a shortage of nourishing hay and wholesome grain to feed the hungry ewes. Shelter to safeguard and protect the suffering sheep from storms and blizzards was scanty and inadequate.

They had only polluted, muddy water to drink. There had been a lack of salt and other trace minerals needed to offset their sickly pastures. In their thin, weak and diseased condition these poor sheep were a pathetic sight.

In my mind's eye I can still see them standing at the fence, huddled sadly in little knots, staring wistfully through the wires at the rich pastures on the other side.

To all their distress, the heartless, selfish owner seemed utterly callous and indifferent. He simply did not care. What if his sheep did WANT green grass; fresh water; shade; safety or shelter from the storms? What if they did WANT relief from wounds, bruises, disease and parasites?

He ignored their needs -- he couldn't care less. Why should he -- they were just sheep -- fit only for the slaughterhouse.

In contrast to the abuse given by this hireling is the care and concern shown by the Good Shepherd. As one of His sheep, I am completely satisfied with His management of my life. Why? Because He is the shepherd to whom no trouble is too great as He cares for His flock. He is the Rancher who is outstanding because of His fondness for sheep -- who loves them for their own sake as well as His personal pleasure in them. He will, if necessary, be on the job twenty-four hours a day to see that they are properly provided for in every detail. Above all, He is very jealous of His name and high reputation as 'The Good Shepherd.'

He is the owner who delights in His flock. For Him there is no greater reward, no deeper satisfaction, than that of seeing His sheep contented, well fed, safe and flourishing under His care. This is indeed His very 'life.' He gives all He has to it. He literally lays Himself out for those who are His.

He will go to no end of trouble and labor to supply them with the finest grazing, the richest pasturage, ample winter feed, and clean water. He will spare Himself no pains to provide shelter from storms, protection from ruthless enemies and the diseases and parasites to which sheep are so susceptible.

No wonder Jesus said, "*I am the Good Shepherd – the Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.*" And again, "*I am come that ye might have life and that ye might have it more abundantly.*"

From early dawn until late at night this utterly self-less Shepherd is alert to the welfare of His flock. For the diligent shepherd rises early and goes out first thing every morning without fail to look over his flock. It is the initial, intimate contact of the day. With a practiced, searching, sympathetic eye he examines the sheep to see that they are fit and content and able to be on their feet. In an instant he can tell if they have been molested during the night -- whether any are ill or if there are some which require special attention.

Repeatedly throughout the day he casts his eye over the flock to make sure that all is well.

Nor even at night is he oblivious to their needs. He sleeps as it were 'with one eye and both ears open' ready at the least sign of trouble to leap up and protect his own.

This is a sublime picture of the care given to those whose lives are under Christ's control. He knows all about their lives from morning to night.

Psalms 68:19, "*Blessed [be] the Lord, [who] daily loadeth us [with benefits, even] the God of our salvation*"

Psalms 121:2-4, "*My help [cometh] from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.*"

In spite of having such a master and owner, the fact remains that some Christians are still not content with His control. They are somewhat dissatisfied, always feeling that somehow the grass beyond the fence must be a little greener. These are carnal Christians -- one might almost call them 'fence crawlers' or 'half Christians' who want the best of both worlds.

Mr Keller writes: I once owned a ewe whose conduct exactly typified this sort of person. She was one of the most attractive sheep that ever belonged to me. Her body was beautifully proportioned. She had a strong constitution and an excellent coat of wool. Her head was clean, alert, well-set with bright eyes. She bore sturdy lambs that matured rapidly.

But in spite of all these attractive attributes she had one pronounced fault. She was restless -- discontented -- a fence crawler. So much so that I came to call her 'Mrs. Gad-about.' This one ewe produced more problems for me than almost all the rest of the flock combined.

No matter what field or pasture the sheep were in, she would search all along the fences or shoreline (we lived by the sea) looking for a loophole she could crawl through and start to feed on the other side.

It was not that she lacked pasturage. My fields were my joy and delight. No sheep in the district had better grazing. With 'Mrs. Gad-about' it was an ingrained habit. She was simply never contented with things as they were. Often when she had forced her way through some such spot in a fence or found a way through the end of the wire at low tide on the beaches, she would end up feeding on bare, brown, burned-up pasturage of a most inferior sort. But she never learned her lesson and continued to fence crawl time after time.

Now it would have been bad enough if she was the only one that did this. It was a sufficient problem to find her and bring her back. But the further point was that she taught her lambs the same tricks. They simply followed her example and soon were as skilled at escaping as their mother.

Even worse, however, was the example she set the other sheep. In a short time she began to lead others through the same holes and over the same dangerous paths down by the sea.

After putting up with her perverseness for a summer, I finally came to the conclusion that to save the rest of the flock from being unsettled, she would have to go.

... it was a difficult decision ... I loved her in the same way I loved the rest. Her strength and beauty and alertness were a delight to the eye. But one morning, I took the killing knife in hand and butchered her. It was the only solution to the dilemma.

She was a sheep, who in spite of all that I had done to give her the very best care -- still wanted something else. She is not the one who said, 'The Lord is my Shepherd -- I shall not want.'

It is a solemn warning to the carnal Christians -- the backslider - the one who wants the best of both worlds. Sometimes in short order they can be cut down.

But we must not assume that this statement "I shall not want" means that the Christian will never experience lack or need. Rather, it means we should be content with the Good Shepherds care and not craving or constantly desiring anything more. Notice the words of the apostle Paul

Philippians 4:11, *"Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."* **Verse 19**, *"But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus."*

One of the common fallacies among Christians today is the assertion that if a man or woman is prospering materially, it is a sign the God is blessing them. This simply isn't so. Rather in bold contrast to this notion, we read in **Revelation 3:17**:

Revelation 3:17, “*Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:*”

Or, in an equally pointed way, Jesus made clear to the rich man who wanted to become one of His disciples that he lacked one thing.

Mark 10:21, “*Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me.*”

Based on the teachings of the Bible we can only conclude that David was not referring to material or physical poverty when he made the statement, “I shall not want”.

Verse 2: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:”

The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very make-up, it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met.

Owing to their timidity they refuse to lie down unless they are free of all **fear**.

Because of the social behavior within a flock, sheep will not lie down unless they are free from **friction or rivalry** with others of their kind.

If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. Only when free of these **pests** can they relax.

Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. They must be free from **hunger**.

It is significant that to be at rest there must be a definite sense of freedom from fear, tension, aggravations and hunger. The unique aspect of the picture is that it is only the shepherd himself who can provide release from these anxieties. It all depends upon the diligence of the owner, whether or not his flock is free of disturbing influences.

When we examine each of these four factors that affect sheep so severely, we will understand why the part the owner plays in their management is so tremendously important. It is actually he who makes it possible for them to lie down, to rest, to relax, to be content, and quiet, and flourishing.

Fear

A flock that is restless, discontented, always agitated and disturbed never does well. And the same is true of people.

It is not generally known 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.

As long as there is even the slightest suspicion of danger from dogs, coyotes, cougars, bears or other enemies, the sheep stand up ready to flee for their lives. They have little or no means of self-defense. They are helpless, timid, feeble creatures whose only recourse is to run.

Mr Keller writes: Two dogs have been known to kill as many as 292 sheep in a single night of unbridled slaughter.

Ewes, heavy in lamb, when chased by dogs or other predators will slip their unborn lambs and lose them in abortions. A shepherd's loss from such forays can be appalling. One morning at dawn, I found nine of my choicest ewes, all soon to lamb, lying dead in the field where a cougar had harried the flock during the night.

From then on, I slept with a .303 rifle and flashlight by my bed. At the least sound of the flock being disturbed, I would leap from bed and calling my faithful collie, dash out into the night, rifle in hand, ready to protect my sheep. In the course of time, I came to realize that nothing so quieted and reassured my sheep as to see me in the field. The presence of their master and owner and protector put them at ease as nothing else could do, and this applied day and night.

In the Christian's life there is no substitute for the keen awareness that my Shepherd is nearby. There is nothing like Christ's presence to dispel the fear, the panic, the terror of the unknown.

It is by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that we are assured that Christ is aware of our problems and is deeply involved in helping us.

2 Timothy 1:7, *“For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”*

Rivalry

The second source of fear from which the shepherd delivers his sheep is that of tension, rivalry, and cruel competition within the flock itself.

In every animal society there is established an order of dominance or status within the group. In a penful of chickens it is referred to as the "pecking order." With cattle it is called the "horning order." Among sheep we speak of the "butting order."

Generally an arrogant, cunning and domineering old ewe will be boss of any bunch of sheep. She maintains her position of prestige by butting and driving other ewes or lambs away from the best grazing or favorite bedgrounds. Succeeding her in precise order, the other sheep all establish and maintain their exact position in the flock by using the same tactics of butting and thrusting at those below and around them.

A vivid and accurate word picture of this process is given to us in **Ezek. 34:15-16 and 20-22**:

Ezekiel 34:15-16, *“I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord GOD. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment.”*

Ezekiel 34:20-22, *“Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD unto them; Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat cattle and between the lean cattle. Because ye have thrust with side and with shoulder, and pushed all the diseased with your horns, till ye have scattered them abroad; Therefore will I save my flock, and they shall no more be a prey; and I will judge between cattle and cattle.”*

This is a startling example, in fact, of the scientific accuracy of the Scriptures in describing a natural phenomenon.

But this is exactly what Jesus taught us in **Matthew 23:12**.

Matthew 23:12 *“And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”*

Because of this rivalry, tension, and competition for status and self assertion, there is friction in a flock. The sheep cannot lie down and rest in contentment. Always they must stand up and defend their rights and contest the challenge of the intruder.

The continuous conflict and jealousy within the flock can be a most detrimental thing. The sheep become edgy, tense, discontented and restless. They lose weight and become irritable.

Mr. Keller writes: But one point always interested me very much, was that whenever I came into view and my presence attracted their attention, the sheep quickly forgot their foolish rivalries and stopped their fighting. The shepherd's presence made all the difference in their behavior.

In any ... human organization or group, be it large or small, the struggle for self-assertion and self-recognition goes on. Most of us fight to be "top sheep." We butt and quarrel and compete to "get ahead." And in the process, people are hurt.

It is here that much jealousy arises ... It is where ill-will and contempt come into being, the place where heated rivalry and deep discontent is born. It is here that discontent gradually grows into a covetous way of life where one has to be forever "standing up" for himself, for his rights, "standing up" just to get ahead of the crowd.

In contrast to this, the picture in the Psalm shows us God's people lying down in quiet contentment. One of the outstanding marks of a Christian should be a serene sense of gentle contentment.

1 Timothy 6:6 *"But godliness with contentment is great gain."*

In His own unique way, Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd ... pointed out that the last would be first and the first last ... any shepherd has great compassion for the poor, weak sheep that get butted about by the more domineering ones.

... the less aggressive sheep were often far more contented, quiet and restful ...

... it was the Shepherd's presence that put an end to all rivalry ... in our human relationships, when we become acutely aware of being in the presence of Christ, our foolish, selfish snobbery and rivalry will end. It is the humble heart walking quietly and contentedly in the close and intimate companionship of Christ that is at rest, that can relax, simply glad to lie down and let the world go by.

KEY POINT: When my eyes are on my Master, they are not on those around me. This is the place of peace.

2 Corinthians 10:12, *"For we dare not make ourselves of the number [rank ourselves], or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise."*

Parasites

As in the case with freedom from fear of predators or friction within the flock, the freedom of fear from the torment of parasites and insects is essential to the contentment of sheep. This aspect of their behavior will be dealt with in greater detail later in the Psalm.

Sheep, especially in the summer, can be driven to absolute distraction by nasal flies, bot flies, warble flies and ticks. When tormented by these pests, it is literally impossible for them to lie down and rest. Instead they are up and on their feet, stamping their legs, shaking their heads, ready to rush off into the bush for relief from the pests.

Only the diligent care of the owner who keeps a constant lookout for these insects will prevent them from annoying his flock. A good shepherd will apply various types of insect repellents to his sheep. He will see that they are dipped to clear their fleeces of ticks. And he will see that there are shelter belts of trees and bush available where they can find refuge and release from their tormentors.

This all entails considerable extra care. It takes time and labor and expensive chemicals to do the job thoroughly. It means, too, that the shepherd must be amongst his charges daily, keeping a close watch on their behavior. As soon as there is the least evidence that they are being disturbed he must take steps to provide them with relief. Always uppermost in his mind is the aim of keeping his flock quiet, contented and at peace.

... thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. (Psa. 23:5)

Hunger

Finally, to produce the conditions necessary for a sheep to lie down, there must be freedom from the fear of hunger. This of course, is clearly implied in the statement, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."

It is not generally recognized that many of the great sheep countries of the world are dry, semi-arid areas. Most breeds of sheep flourish best in this sort of terrain. They are susceptible to fewer hazards of health or parasites where the climate is dry. But in those same regions it is neither natural nor common to find green pastures. For example, Palestine, where David wrote this Psalm and kept his father's flocks, especially near Bethlehem, is a dry, brown, sun-burned wasteland.

Green pastures did not just happen by chance. 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 and legumes; of irrigating with water and husbanding with care the crops of forage that would feed the flocks.

... green pastures are essential to success with sheep. When lambs are maturing and the ewes need green, succulent feed for a heavy milk flow, there is no substitute for good pasturage.

In the Scriptures, the picture portrayed of the Promised Land ... was that of a "*land flowing with milk and honey*." Not only is this figurative language, but also essentially scientific terminology. In agricultural terms we speak of a "milk flow" and "honey flow." By this we mean the peak season of spring and summer when pastures are at their most productive stages. The livestock that feed on the forage and the bees that visit the blossoms are said to be producing a corresponding "flow" of milk or honey. So a land flowing with milk and honey is a land of rich, green, luxuriant pastures.

The Good Shepherd has supplied green pastures for those who care to move in onto them and there find peace and plenty.

Verse 2 cont.: "...he leadeth me beside the still waters."

Although sheep thrive in dry, semi-arid country, they still require water. It will be noticed that here again the key or the clue to where water can be obtained lies with the shepherd. It is he who knows where the best drinking places are. In fact, very often he is the one who with much effort and industry has provided the watering places. And it is to these spots that he leads the flock.

But before thinking about the water sources themselves, we do well to understand the role of water in the animal body and why it is so essential for its well-being. The body of an animal such as a sheep is composed of about 70 percent water on an average. This fluid is used to maintain normal body metabolism; it is a portion of every cell, contributing to its turgidity and normal life functions. Water

determines the vitality, strength and vigor of the sheep and is essential to its health and general well-being.

If the supply of water for an animal drops off, bodily desiccation sets in. This dehydration of the tissues can result in serious damage to them. It can also mean that the animal becomes weak and impoverished.

When sheep are thirsty, they become restless and set out in search of water to satisfy their thirst. If not led to the good water supplies of clean, pure water, they will often end up drinking from the polluted pot holes where they pick up such internal parasites as nematodes, liver flukes or other disease germs.

David, when he composed **Psalm 23** looking at life from the standpoint of a sheep wrote, "*He [the Good Shepherd] leadeth me beside the still waters.*" In other words, He alone knows where the still, quiet, deep, clean, pure water is to be found that alone can satisfy His sheep and keep them fit and strong.

... water for sheep came from three main sources ... dew on the grass ... deep wells ... or springs and streams.

Most people are not aware that sheep can go for months on end, especially if the weather is not too hot, without actually drinking, if there is heavy dew on the grass each morning. Sheep, by habit, rise just before dawn and start to feed. Or if there is bright moonlight they will graze at night. The early hours are when the vegetation is drenched with dew, and sheep can keep fit on the amount of water taken in with their forage when they graze just before and after dawn.

...dew is a clear, clean, pure source of water. The good shepherd ... makes sure that his sheep can be out and grazing on this dew drenched vegetation. If necessary, it will mean he himself has to rise early to be out with his flock.

Spiritually speaking, we know that water is commonly used as a symbol of God's Holy Spirit. In speaking of quenching our spiritual thirst, Jesus said

John 7:37-39, "*...If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet [given]; because that Jesus was not yet glorified)* "

As our Good Shepherd, Jesus insures us that if we come to him, we will never thirst for an ample supply of His Holy Spirit.

Verse 3: "He restoreth my soul:"

In studying this Psalm it must always be remembered that it is a sheep in the Good Shepherd's care who is speaking. This being the case, one might well ask, "Why then this statement ... "He restoreth my soul"? Surely it would be assumed that anyone in the Good Shepherd's care could never become so distressed in soul as to need restoration.

But the fact remains that this does happen. Even David, the author of the Psalm, who was much loved of God, knew what it was to be cast down and dejected. He had tasted defeat in his life and felt the frustration of having fallen under temptation. David was acquainted with the bitterness of feeling hopeless and without strength in himself.

Psalms 42:5-6, "*Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and [why] art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him [for] the help of his countenance. O my God, my soul is cast down within me: therefore will I remember thee from the land of Jordan, and of the*

Hermonites, from the hill Mizar.” Verse 11, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, [who is] the health of my countenance, and my God.”

Now there is an exact parallel to this in caring for sheep. Only those intimately acquainted with sheep and their habits understand the significance of a "cast" sheep or a "cast down" sheep.

This is an old English shepherd's term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up again by itself. A "cast" sheep is a very pathetic site. Lying on its back, its feet in the air, it flays away frantically struggling to stand up, without success. Sometimes it will bleat a little for help, but generally it lies there lashing about in frightened frustration.

If the owner does not arrive on the scene within a reasonably short time, the sheep will die. This is but another reason why it is so essential for a careful shepherd to look over his flock every day, counting them to see if all are able to be up and on their feet. If one or two are missing, often the first thought to flash in his mind is, One of my sheep is cast somewhere. I must go in search and set it on its feet again.

It is not only the shepherd who keeps a sharp eye for cast sheep, but also the predators. Buzzards, vultures, dogs, coyotes and cougars all know that a cast sheep is easy prey and death is not far off.

This knowledge that any "cast" sheep is helpless, close to death and vulnerable to attack, makes the whole problem of cast sheep serious for the manager.

Nothing seems to arouse his constant care and diligent attention to the flock as the fact that even sheep can become cast and be a casualty. Actually it is often the fat sheep that are the most easily cast.

The way it happens is this. A heavy, fat, or long fleeced sheep will lie down comfortably in some little hollow or depression in the ground. It may roll on its side slightly to stretch out or relax. Suddenly the center of gravity in the body shifts so that it turns on its back far enough that the feet no longer touch the ground. It may feel a sense of panic and start to paw frantically. Frequently this only makes things worse. It rolls over even further. Now it is quite impossible for it to regain its feet.

As it lies there struggling, gases begin to build up in the rumen. As these expand they tend to retard and cut off blood circulation to extremities of the body, especially the legs. If the weather is very hot and sunny, a cast sheep can die in a few hours. If it is cool and cloudy and rainy it may survive in this position for several days.

Mr. Keller writes: It is not easy to convey on paper the sense of this ever present danger. If I saw black-winged buzzards circling overhead ... anxiety would grip me. This is part of the drama depicted for us in the story of the ninety and nine sheep with one astray. This is the Shepherd's deep concern; his agonizing search; his longing to find the missing one; his delight in restoring it not only to its feet, but also to the flock, as well as to himself.

Again and again I would spend hours searching for a single sheep that was missing ... As soon as I reached the cast ewe, my very first impulse was to pick it up ... I would hold her erect, rubbing her limbs to restore the circulation to her legs. When the sheep started to walk again, she often stumbled, staggered and collapsed. Little by little the sheep would regain its equilibrium. It would start to walk steadily and surely. By and by it would dash away to rejoin the others, set free from its fears and frustrations, given another chance to live a little longer. All of this pageantry is conveyed to my heart and mind when I repeat the simple statement, "He restoreth my soul!"

There is something intensely personal ... tender ... endearing, yet ... fraught with danger in the picture. ...the sheep is so helpless, so utterly immobilized though otherwise strong, healthy and flourishing; while on the other hand there is the attentive owner quick and ready to come to its rescue -- ever patient and tender and helpful.

Many people have the idea that when a child of God falls, when he is frustrated and helpless in a spiritual dilemma, God becomes disgusted, fed-up and even furious with him. This simply is not so.

1 Peter 5:6-7, *"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you."*

One of the great revelations of the heart ... given to us by Christ is that of Himself as our Shepherd. He has the same identical sensations of anxiety, concern and compassion for cast men and women as ... [the shepherd] for cast sheep.

As with sheep, so with Christians, some basic principles and parallels apply which will help us to grasp the way in which a man or woman can be "cast."

There is, first of all, the idea for looking for a soft spot. The sheep that choose the comfortable, soft, rounded hollows in the ground in which to lie down very often become cast. In such a situation it is so easy to roll over on their backs.

In the Christian life there is a danger in always looking for the easy place, the cozy corner, the comfortable position where there is no hardship, no need for endurance, no demand upon self-discipline.

We should think "Sometimes if, through self-indulgence, I am unwilling to forfeit or forego the soft life, the easy way, the cozy corner, then the Good Shepherd may well move me to a pasture where things aren't quite so comfortable -- not only for my own good, but also His benefit as well."

There is the aspect, too, of a sheep simply having too much wool. Often when the fleece becomes very long, and heavily matted with mud, manure, burrs and other debris, it is much easier for a sheep to become cast, literally weighed down with its own wool... Here is where I find the clinging accumulation of things, of possessions, of worldly ideas beginning to weigh me down, drag me down, hold me down. It is significant that no high priest was ever allowed to wear wool when he entered the Holy of Holies.

Mark 4:19, *"And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful."*

Verse 3 cont.: "...he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

Sheep are notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves they will follow the same trails until they become ruts; graze the same hills until they turn to desert wastes; pollute their own ground until it is corrupt with disease and parasites.

A commonly held, but serious misconception about sheep is that they can just "get along anywhere." The truth is quite the reverse. No other class of livestock require more careful handling, more detailed direction, than do sheep.

Because of the behavior of sheep and their preference for certain favored spots, these well-worn areas become quickly infested with parasites of all kinds. In a short time a whole flock can thus become infected with worms, nematodes, and scab. The final upshot is that both land and owner are ruined while the sheep become thin, wasted, and sickly.

The greatest single safeguard which a shepherd has in handling his flock is to keep them on the move... they dare not be left on the same ground too long. They must be shifted from pasture to pasture periodically. This prevents over-grazing of the forage. It forestalls the re-infestation of the sheep with internal parasites or disease, since the sheep move off the infested ground before these organisms complete their life cycles.

This is precisely the sort of action and the idea David had in mind when he spoke of being led in paths of righteousness. In this following of a precise plan of operation lies the secret for healthy flocks and healthy lands.

Verse 4: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;”

From a shepherd's point of view this statement makes the **halfway** stage in the Psalm . It is as though the sheep up to this point has been boasting to its unfortunate neighbor across the fence about the excellent care it is receiving from its owner on the home ranch throughout the winter and spring.

Now it turns to address the shepherd directly. The personal pronouns "I" and "Thou" enter the conversation. It becomes a most intimate discourse of deep affection.

Mr. Keller writes: This is natural and normal. The long treks into the high country with their summer range begin here. Left behind are the neglected sheep on the other side of the fence. Their owner knows nothing of the hill country – the mountain meadows to which these sheep will be led. Their summer will be spent in the close companionship and solitary care of the good shepherd.

Both in Palestine and on our western sheep ranches, this division of the year is common practice. Most of the efficient sheepmen endeavor to take their flocks onto distant summer ranges during summer. This often entails long "drives." The sheep move along slowly, feeding as they go, gradually working their way up the mountains behind the receding snow. By late summer they are well up on the remote alpine meadows above timberline.

With the approach of autumn, early snow settles on the highest ridges, relentlessly forcing the flock to withdraw back down to lower elevations. Finally, toward the end of the year as fall passes, the sheep are driven home to the ranch headquarters where they will spend the winter. It is this segment of the yearly operations that is described in the last half of the poem.

During this time the flock is entirely alone with the shepherd. They are in intimate contact with him and under his most personal attention day and night. That is why these last verses are couched in such intimate first-person language.

It is well to remember that all of this is done against a dramatic background of wild mountains, rushing rivers, alpine meadows and high rangelands. David ... knew this type of terrain first hand. When Samuel was sent of God to anoint him king over Israel ... he was high up on the hills tending his father's flock. They had to send for him to come home. He knew from firsthand experience ... the difficulties and dangers ... all the dangers of rampaging rivers in flood; avalanches; rock slides; poisonous plants; the ravages of predators that raid the flock or the awesome storms of sleet and hail and snow were to familiar to him. He was fully prepared to safeguard his flock and tend them with skill under every circumstance.

All of this is brought out in the beautiful simplicity of the last verses. "I will not fear, for thou art with me ..." – with me in every situation, in every dark trial, in every dismal disappointment, in every distressing dilemma.

Every mountain has its valleys. Its sides are scarred by deep ravines and gulches and draws. And the best route to the top is always along these valleys. Any shepherd familiar with the high country knows this. He leads his flock gently, but persistently up the paths that wind through the dark valleys.

There is a second reason why sheep are taken to the mountain tops by way of the valleys. Not only is this the way to the gentlest grades, but also it is the well watered route. Here one finds refreshing water all along the way. There are rivers, streams, springs and quiet pools in the deep defiles.

A third reason why the rancher chooses to take his flock into the high country by way of the valleys is that this is generally where the richest feed and best forage is to be found along the route. The flock is moved along gently -- they are not hurried. There are lambs along which have never been this way before. The shepherd wants to be sure there will not only be water but also the best grazing available for the ewes and their lambs. Naturally these grassy glades are often on the floor of steep-walled canyons and gulches. There may be towering cliffs above them on either side. The valley floor itself may be in dark shadow with the sun seldom reaching the bottom except for a few hours around noon.

The shepherd knows from past experience that predators like coyotes, bears, wolves or cougars can take cover in these broken cliffs and from their vantage point prey on his flock. There could be rock slides, mud or snow avalanches and a dozen other natural disasters that would destroy or injure his sheep. But in spite of the hazards he also knows that this is still the best way to take his flock to the high country. He spares himself no pains or trouble or time to keep an eye out for any danger that might develop.

One of the most terrible threats is the sudden chilling storms of sleet, rain and snow... If sheep become soaked and chilled with a freezing rain, the exposure can kill them in a very short time. They are thin-skinned creatures, easily susceptible to colds, pneumonia and other respiratory complications.

Our Shepherd knows all of this when He leads us through the valleys with Himself. He knows where we can find strength, and sustenance and gentle grazing despite every threat of disaster about us.

Verse 4 cont.: "thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

When the shepherd is afield with his flock in the high country, it is customary for him to carry a minimum of equipment. This was especially true in olden times where the shepherds did not have the benefit of mechanized equipment to transport camp supplies across the rough country.

Mr. Keller writes: In the Middle East the shepherd carries only a rod and staff. Some of my most vivid boyhood recollections are those of watching the African herdsmen shepherding their stock with only a long slender stick and a rough "knob-kerrie" in their hands. These are the common and universal equipment of the primitive sheepman.

Each shepherd boy, from the time he first starts to tend his father's flock, takes special pride in the selection of a rod and staff exactly suited to his own size and strength. He goes into the bush and selects a young sapling which is dug from the ground. This is carved and whittled down with great care and patience. The enlarged base of the sapling where its trunk joins the roots is shaped into a smooth, rounded head of hard wood. The sapling itself is shaped to exactly fit the owner's hand. After he completes it, the shepherd boy spends hours practicing with this club, learning how to throw it with amazing speed and accuracy. It becomes his main weapon of defense for both himself and his sheep. ...the rod, in fact, was an extension of the owner's own right arm. It stood as a symbol of his strength, his power, his authority in any serious situation.

The rod was what he relied on to safeguard both himself and his flock in danger. And it was, furthermore, the instrument he used to discipline and correct any wayward sheep that insisted on wandering away.

...an interesting sidelight on the word "rod" ... the slang term "rod" has been applied to hand-guns such as pistols and revolvers which were carried by cowboys, and other western rangeland. The connotation is exactly the same as that used in this Psalm.

There is a second dimension in which the rod is used by the shepherd for the welfare of his sheep -- namely that of discipline. The club is used for this purpose perhaps more than any other.

If the shepherd saw a sheep wandering away from its own, or approaching poisonous weeds, or getting too close to danger of one sort or another, the club would go whistling through the air to send the wayward animal scurrying back to the bunch.

Another interesting use of the rod in the shepherd's hand was to examine and count the sheep. In the terminology of the Old Testament this was referred to as passing "under the rod":

Ezek. 20:37 , *"And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant:"*

This meant not only coming under the owner's control and authority, but also to be subject to his most careful, intimate and firsthand examination. A sheep that passed "under the rod" was one which had been counted and looked over with great care to make sure all was well with it.

Because of their long wool it is not always easy to detect disease, wounds, or defects in sheep. For example at a sheep show an inferior animal can be clipped and shaped and shown so as to appear a perfect specimen. But the skilled judge will take his rod and part the sheep's wool to determine the condition of the skin, the cleanliness of the fleece and the conformation of the body. In plain language, "One just does not pull the wool over his [judge's] eyes."

In caring for his sheep, the good shepherd, the careful manager, will from time to time make a careful examination of each individual sheep. As each animal comes out of the corral and through the gate, it is stopped by the shepherd's outstretched rod. He opens the fleece with the rod; he runs his skillful hands over the body; he feels for any sign of trouble; he examines the sheep with care to see if all is well. This is a most searching process entailing every intimate detail. It is, too, a comfort to the sheep for only in this way can its hidden problems be laid bare before the shepherd.

Finally the shepherd's rod is an instrument of protection both for himself and his sheep when they are in danger. It is used both as a defense and a deterrent against anything that would attack.

The skilled shepherd uses his rod to drive off predators like coyotes, wolves, cougars or stray dogs. Often it is used to beat the brush discouraging snakes and other creatures from disturbing the flock. In extreme causes, such as David recounted to Saul, the psalmist no doubt used his rod to attack the lion and the bear that came to raid his flocks.

Mr. Keller writes: Once in Kenya photographing elephants, I was being accompanied by a young Masai herder who carried a club in his hand. We came to the crest of a hill from which we could see a herd of elephants in the thick bush below us. To drive them out into the open we decided to dislodge a boulder and roll it down the slope. As we heaved and pushed against the great rock, a cobra, coiled beneath it, suddenly came into view ready to strike. In a split second the alert shepherd boy lashed out with his club killing the snake on the spot. The weapon had never left his hand, even while we worked on the rock.

We turn now to discuss and consider the shepherd's staff. In a sense, the staff, more than any other item of his personal equipment, identifies the shepherd as a shepherd. No one in any other profession carries a shepherd's staff. It is uniquely an instrument used for the care and management of sheep --

and only sheep. It will not do for cattle, horses or hogs. It is designed, shaped and adapted especially to the needs of sheep.

The staff is essentially a symbol of the concern, the compassion that a shepherd has for his charges. No other single word can better describe its function on behalf of the flock than that it is for their "comfort."

Whereas the rod conveys the concept of authority, of power, of discipline, of defense against danger, the word "staff" speaks of all that is longsuffering and kind.

The shepherd's staff is normally a long, slender stick, often with a crook or hook on one end. It is selected with care by the owner; it is shaped, smoothed, and cut to best suit his own personal use.

Somehow the staff is of special comfort to the shepherd himself. In the tough tramps and during the long weary watches with his sheep, he leans on it for support and strength. It becomes to him a most precious comfort and help in his duties.

There are three areas of sheep management in which the staff plays a most significant role. The first of these lies in drawing sheep together into an intimate relationship. The shepherd will use his staff to gently lift a newborn lamb and bring it to its mother if they become parted. He does this because he does not wish to have the ewe reject her offspring if it bears the odor of his hands upon it.

...the staff is used by the shepherd to reach out and catch individual sheep, young or old, and draw them close to himself for intimate examination. The staff is very useful this way for the shy and timid sheep normally tend to keep at a distance from the shepherd.

The staff is also used for guiding sheep. **Mr. Keller writes:** Again and again I have seen a shepherd use his staff to guide his sheep gently into a new path or through some gate or along dangerous, difficult routes. He does not use it actually to beat the beast. Rather, the tip of the long slender stick is laid gently against the animal's side and the pressure applied guides the sheep in the way the owner wants it to go. Thus the sheep is reassured of its proper path.

Being stubborn creatures sheep often get into the most ridiculous and preposterous dilemmas. I have seen my own sheep, greedy for one more mouthful of green grass, climb down steep cliffs where they slipped and fell into the sea. Only my long shepherd's staff could lift them out of the water back onto solid ground.

Another common occurrence was to find sheep stuck fast in labyrinths of wild roses or brambles where they had pushed in to find a few stray mouthfuls of green grass. Soon the thorns were so hooked in their wool they could not possibly pull free, tug as they might. Only the use of the staff could free them from their entanglement.

Verse 5: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies"

In thinking about this statement, it is well to bear in mind that the sheep are approaching the high mountain country of the summer ranges. These are known as alplands or tablelands, so much sought after by shepherds.

In some of the finest sheep country of the world, especially in the Western United States and Southern Europe, the high plateau of the sheep ranges were always referred to as "mesas" -- the Spanish word for "tables." Oddly enough, the African word for a table is also "mesa" ... the use of this word is not uncommon in referring to the high, flat-topped plateau of the continent.

So it may be seen that what David referred to as a table was actually the entire high summer range. Though these "mesas" may have been remote and hard to reach, the energetic and aggressive sheep owner takes the time and trouble to ready them for the arrival of his flocks.

Early in the season, even before all the snow has been melted ... he will go ahead and make preliminary survey trips into this rough, wild country. He will look it over with great care, keeping ever in mind its best use for his flock during the coming season. Then just before the sheep arrive, he will make another expedition or two to prepare the tableland for them. He takes along a supply of salt and minerals to be distributed over the range at strategic spots for the benefit of the sheep during the summer.

I can picture him [David] walking slowly over the summer range ahead of his flock. His eagle eye is sharp for any signs of poisonous weeds which he would pluck before his sheep got to them. No doubt he had armfuls to get rid of for the safety of his flock.

Another task the attentive shepherd takes on in the summer is to keep an eye out for predators. He will look for signs and spoor of wolves, coyotes, cougars and bears. If these raid or molest the sheep he will have to hunt them down or go to great pains to trap them so that his flock can rest in peace.

Often what actually happens is that these crafty ones are up on the rimrock watching every movement the sheep make, hoping for a chance to make a swift, sneaking attack that will stampede the sheep. Then one or other of the flock is bound to fall easy prey to the attacker's fierce teeth and claws.

Only the alertness of the shepherd who tends his flock on the tableland in full view of possible enemies can prevent them from falling prey to attack. It is only his preparation for such an eventuality that can possibly save the sheep from being slaughtered and panicked by their predators.

There is another chore which the shepherd takes care of on the tableland. He clears out the water holes, springs and drinking places for his stock. He has to clean out the accumulated debris of leaves, twigs, stones and soil which may have fallen into the water source during the autumn and winter. He may need to repair small earth dams he has made to hold water. And he will open the springs that may have become overgrown with grass and brush and weeds. It is all his work, his preparation of the table for his own sheep in summer.

Verse 5 cont.: "...thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

As one meditates on this magnificent poem it is helpful to keep in mind that the poet is recounting the significant events of the full year in a sheep's life. He takes us with him from the home ranch where every need is so carefully supplied by the owner, out into the green pastures, along the still waters, up through the mountain valleys to the high tablelands of summer.

Here, now, where it would appear the sheep are in a magnificent, inspiring setting on the high meadows; where there are clear running springs; where the forage is fresh and tender; where there is the intimate close contact with the shepherd; suddenly we find "a fly in the ointment," so to speak.

For in the terminology of the shepherd, "summer time is fly time." By this, reference is made to the hordes of insects that emerge with the advent of warm weather. Only those people who have kept livestock or studied wildlife habits are aware of the serious problems for animals presented by insects in the summer.

Sheep are especially troubled by the nose fly, or nasal fly, as it is sometimes called. These little flies buzz about the sheep's head, attempting to deposit their eggs on the damp, mucous membranes of the sheep's nose. If they are successful, the eggs will hatch in a few days to form small, slender, worm-like larvae. They work their way up the nasal passages into the sheep's head; they burrow into the flesh and there set up an intense irritation accompanied by severe inflammation.

For relief from this agonizing annoyance, sheep will deliberately beat their heads against trees, rocks, posts, or brush. They will rub them in the soil and thrash around against woody growth. In extreme cases of intense infestation, a sheep may even kill itself.

Often advanced stages of infection from these flies will lead to blindness.

Because of all this, when the nose flies hover around the flock, some of the sheep become frantic with fear and panic in their attempt to escape their tormentors.

They will stamp their feet erratically and race from place to place in the pasture trying desperately to elude the flies. Some may run so much they will drop from sheer exhaustion. Others may toss their heads up and down for hours.

Mr. Keller writes: All this excitement and distraction has a devastating effect on the entire flock. Only the strictest attention to the behavior of the sheep by the shepherd can forestall the difficulties of "fly time." At the very first sign of flies among the flock, he will apply an antidote to their heads. I always preferred to use a homemade remedy composed of linseed oil, sulphur and tar which was smeared over the sheep's nose and head as a protection against nose flies.

What an incredible transformation this would make. Once the oil had been applied to the sheep's head, there was an immediate change in behavior. The sheep would start to feed quietly again, then soon lie down in peaceful contentment.

But summertime for the sheep is more than just fly-time. It is also "scab-time." Scab is an irritating and highly contagious disease common among sheep the world over. Caused by a minute, microscopic parasite that proliferates in warm weather, "scab" spreads throughout a flock by direct contact between infected and non-infected animals.

Sheep love to rub heads in an affectionate and friendly manner. Scab is often found most commonly around the head. When two sheep rub together, the infection spreads readily from one to the other.

In the Old Testament when it was declared that the sacrificial lambs should be without blemish, the thought uppermost in the writer's mind was that the animal should be free of scab.

Again, as with flies, the only effective antidote is to apply linseed oil, sulphur and other chemicals that can control this disease. In many sheep-rearing countries dips are built and the entire flock is put through the dip. Each animal is completely submerged in the solution until its entire body is soaked. The most difficult part to do is the head. The head has to be plunged under repeatedly to insure that scab there will be controlled. Some shepherds take great care to treat the head by hand.

So again this is precisely what David meant when he wrote, "*Thou anointest my head with oil.*" Again, it was the only antidote for scab ... in Palestine the old remedy for this disease was olive oil mixed with sulphur and spices.

Now as summer, in the high country, moves gradually into autumn, subtle changes occur both in the countryside and in the sheep. In the flock there are subtle changes. This is the season of the rut, or mating, of great battles between the rams for possession of the ewes. The necks of the monarchs swell and grow strong. They strut proudly across the pastures and fight furiously for the favors of the ewes. The crash of heads and thud of colliding bodies can be heard through the hours of day and night.

Mr. Keller writes: The shepherd knows all about this. He knows that some of the sheep will and can actually kill, injure and maim each other in these deadly combats. So he decides on a

very simple remedy. At this season of the year he will catch his rams and smear their heads with grease. I used to apply generous quantities of axle grease to the head and nose of each ram. Then when they collide in their great crashing battles the lubricant would make them glance off each other in such a ludicrous way they stood there feeling rather stupid and frustrated. In this way, much of the heat and tension was dissipated and little damage done.

Summer moves into autumn. Storms of sleet and hail and early snow begin to sweep over the high country. Soon the flocks will be driven from the alplands and tablelands. They will turn again toward the home ranch for the long, quiet winter season.

The sheep have respite now from flies, insects and scab. No other season finds them so fit and well and strong. No wonder David wrote, "My cup runneth over."

But at the same time, unexpected blizzards can blow up or sleet storms suddenly shroud the hills. The flock and their owner can pass through appalling suffering together.

Mr. Keller writes: It is here that I grasp another aspect ... the meaning of a cup that overflows. In tending my sheep, I carried a bottle in my pocket containing a mixture of brandy and water. Whenever a ewe or lamb was chilled from undue exposure to wet, cold weather, I would pour a few spoonfuls down its throat. In a matter of minutes the chilled creature would be on its feet and full of renewed energy. It was especially cute the way the lambs would wiggle their tails with joyous excitement as the warmth from the brandy spread through their bodies.

The important thing was for me to be there on time, to find the frozen, chilled sheep before it was too late. I had to be in the storm with them, alert to every one that was in distress.

My Shepherd is alert to every approaching disaster that threatens His people. He has been through the storms of suffering before. He bore our sorrows and was acquainted with our grief.

And now no matter what storms I face, His very life and strength and vitality is poured into mine. It overflows so the cup of my life runs over with His life.

Verse 6: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:"

Throughout the study of this Psalm continuous emphasis has been put upon the care exercised by the attentive shepherd. It has been stressed how essential to the welfare of the sheep is the rancher's diligent effort and labor. All the benefits enjoyed by a flock under skilled and loving management have been drawn in bold lines. Now all of this is summed up here by the Psalmist in one brave but simple statement: "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*"!

All the care, all the work, all the alert watchfulness, all the skill, all the concern, all the self-sacrifice are born of His love -- the love of One who loves His sheep, loves His work, loves His role as a Shepherd.

It is worth reiterating at this point that sheep can, under mismanagement, be the most destructive livestock ... they can ruin and ravage land almost beyond remedy. But in bold contrast they can, on the other hand, be the most beneficial of all livestock... Their manure is the best balanced of any produced by domestic stock. When scattered efficiently over the pastures it proves of enormous benefit to the soil. The sheep's habit of seeking the highest rise of ground on which to rest insures that the fertility from the rich low land is re-deposited on the less productive higher ground. No other livestock will consume as wide a variety of herbage. Sheep eat all sorts of weeds and other undesirable plants which might otherwise invade a field. In a few years a flock of well-managed sheep will clean up and restore a piece of ravaged land as no other creature can do.

Mr. Keller writes: In ancient literature sheep were referred to as "those of the golden hooves" -- simply because they were regarded and esteemed so highly for their beneficial effect on the land. In my own experience as a sheep rancher I have, in just a few years, seen two derelict ranches restored to high productivity and usefulness. More than this, what before appeared as depressing eyesores became beautiful, park-like properties of immense worth.

In other words, goodness and mercy had followed my flocks. They left behind them something worthwhile, productive, beautiful and beneficial to both themselves, others and me.

Verse 6 cont.: "...and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."

This Psalm began with the proud, joyous statement "The Lord is my Shepherd." Now it closes with the equally positive affirmation "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

The word "house" used here has a much deeper meaning than most people would at first suspect. Many speak of the house of the Lord as the sanctuary, church or meeting place of God's people.

Actually what is referred to by "house" is the family or household or flock of the Good Shepherd (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 3:15). This sheep is bragging "I belong to the Good Shepherd – I'm a part of His household!" We as Christians should realize and be proud that we have been begotten into God's very own Family – soon to be born again in a resurrection to dwell in His house forever.

We've seen the quality of care that our Good Shepherd gives to us while we are yet His sheep. But were not to remain sheep forever, we are destined to be born into the Family of God, there to dwell with Him for evermore. Can we begin to imagine what eternal life with God, as His very children, will be like? David had an idea about this...

Psalms 16:11, *"Thou will show me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."*

Eternal life in God's very Family is ours. Pleasures for evermore can be ours; if only we will here and obey our Shepherd's voice.

Do we hear His voice? If so, do we listen to what He says?

John 10:27-28, *"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."*