

## Exploring the Nature of God (God, Our Shepherd)

### Introduction:

- I. We now come to our final lesson in this series in which we have been, “Exploring the Nature of God.” It has been, I believe, a productive series, for any time we spend emphasizing God is time well spent. In this series of lessons we have looked at four names worn by God. He has been called Elohim, indicating power and strength. He has been called Yahweh, indicating eternal existence and is used in such a way that implies a close relationship with man. He has been called Yahweh-Yireh, meaning, the Lord will see and provide. And He has been called Yahweh-Nissi, meaning, the Lord is our banner and our strength in times of conflict.
  
- II. In this final lesson, we want to look at one more name by which God is called. That name is Yahweh-Ra /ah. Now, technically this is more of a description of God than it is a name. The Hebrew word Ra /ah means “to tend to or shepherd a flock,” and it is found in one of the most famous passages in the Bible, that is Psa. 23, and, along with the name Yahweh, is translated, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” Our final lesson, then, is entitled, God, Our Shepherd.

Outside of Jn. 3:16, Psalms 23 might be the most popular passage in the Bible. Many have committed it to memory. Preachers have used it to comfort those who are going through trials and tribulations or suffering from some terrible illness, or even dying. For some the words of this Psalm, or portions of it, have been the last words that they have ever heard or spoken. Yes, Psalms 23 is one of the most encouraging and uplifting and faith-producing passages that we have in scripture, and it tells us volumes about the nature of our God. Let’s conclude this series by taking a contextual look at the first four verses of Psalms 23.

### Lesson:

#### I. ***“The Lord Is My Shepherd” (ver. 1a).***

The opening words of this Psalm are comforting because we all need a shepherd. Listen: the primary thrust of this Psalm is what God does for man, but the only way we can see the true value and beauty of the Psalm is to realize how pitiful we are. You see, in this Psalm it is implied that we are like sheep and in some ways sheep are pitiful animals. A man by the name of Philip Keller was a sheep rancher for 17 years. He wrote a book entitled, “*A Shepherd Looks at the Twenty-third Psalm.*” Listen to how he describes sheep:

They require more attention than any other livestock. They just can’t take care of themselves. Unless their shepherd makes them move on, sheep will actually ruin a pasture, eating every blade of grass, until finally a fertile pasture is nothing but barren soil. Sheep are near-sighted & very stubborn, but easily frightened. An entire flock can be stampeded by a jack rabbit.

They have little means of defense. They’re timid, feeble creatures. Their only recourse is to run if no shepherd is there to protect them. Sheep have no homing instincts. A dog, horse, cat, or a

bird can find its way home, but when a sheep gets lost, it's a goner unless someone rescues it (Phillip Keller).

What's the point? The point is we need a shepherd because we are all like sheep. Isaiah said that we are like sheep.

*Isa 53:6*

*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way...*

Jesus said that we are like sheep.

*Mark 6:34*

*When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.*

Peter said that we are like sheep.

*Peter 2:25*

*For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

So then, the Bible clearly says that we are like sheep and so one thing we all need is a shepherd. You see, like sheep we are easily led astray and so we need a shepherd to give us guidance and direction. Like sheep we are easily frightened and so we need a shepherd to give us courage. Like sheep we too easily follow one another, sometimes to our own demise and so we need a shepherd to lead us in the right way. If there is one thing we should all see tonight it is that we need a shepherd. And thank God we have Him, for with David we can say, "The Lord is my Shepherd." And listen to me, now: We don't have say, "The Lord *might be* my Shepherd." No, the Lord IS my Shepherd. We don't have to say, "The Lord *was* my Shepherd." No, the Lord IS my Shepherd. We don't have to say, "The Lord *will be* my Shepherd *someday*." No, the Lord IS my Shepherd right now. David had confidence in this fact and so should we. On Sunday and Monday and all through the week, we should be able to say the Lord is my Shepherd. In January and February and all through the year, we should be able to say the Lord is my Shepherd. Whether we are at home or on the road, whether we are in a state of abundance or in a place of poverty, we should all be able to say, "*The Lord is my Shepherd.*" But in practical terms what is the blessing in being able to say, "*The Lord is my Shepherd?*" Well, David tells us.

## **II. "I Shall Not Want" (ver. 1b).**

Now, David's primary point is that he would never lack what he needed because Yahweh was his Shepherd. But I believe the statement implies a little more than that. It seems to me that "*I shall not want,*" is not only an affirmation of God's willingness to provide, but also David's determination to be content. Because God indeed supplies our needs, David knew he could be content no matter what. Listen to me: God gives all of His sheep what they need, but still there are many among us

who want. We want even when we have all that we need. Why? Because some haven't learned to be content. In fact, we live in a society of discontent. Listen to these fitting words from Jason Lehman:

It was spring. But it was summer I wanted - The warm days, & the great outdoors.  
It was summer. But it was fall I wanted - The colorful leaves, & the cool, dry air.  
It was fall. But it was winter I wanted - The beautiful snow, & the joy of the holiday season.  
It was winter. But it was spring I wanted - The warmth, & the blossoming of nature.

I was a child. But it was adulthood I wanted - The freedom, & the respect.  
I was 20. But it was 30 I wanted - To be mature, & sophisticated.  
I was middle-aged. But it was 20 I wanted - The youth, & the free spirit.  
I was retired. But it was middle-age I wanted - The presence of mind, without limitations.  
Then my life was over and I never got what I wanted.

Some people are never satisfied. Let's say with David, *I shall not want*, not only because we know that God will provide for us in the future, but because we are content with His provisions right now. Let's be like the little girl who slightly misquoted Psalm 23:1 in Bible class. She said, "*The Lord is my shepherd; I've got all I want.*" Even though she misquoted it, I think she captured the true spirit of what David was saying. If you have such a one as Yahweh-Ra /ah in your life, that is, if the Lord is your Shepherd, then you can truly say, "*I've got all I want.*" Let me tell you brethren, this is a biblical disposition.

*Phil 4:11*

*Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content. ASV*

*1 Tim 6:6-9*

*Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, 7 for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. 8 But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.*

*Heb 13:5*

*Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have..." ESV*

Why is this contentment possible? Because we can say, "*The Lord is my Shepherd,*" and a part of being a good shepherd is the willingness to provide all that the sheep need. Listen to David:

**III. "*He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters*" (ver. 2).**

The picture here is that of peaceful rest. Those who are experts in regard to the behavior of sheep, tell us that getting sheep to lie down is sometimes very difficult. In order for them to do so, they have to pretty much have complete peace. If they

are afraid for any reason, they will not lie down. If they are having problems with other sheep of the flock, they will not lie down. If they are being tortured by some kind of pest like fleas or flies, they will not lie down. If they are being discomforted by the pangs of hunger, they will not lie down. So, the words of David here are meant to describe a good shepherd who has provided the sheep with relief from all anxiety. Now, one way the shepherd accomplishes this is by supplying the sheep with all they that need. Green pastures are pastures that are lush and full and ready to be grazed. So, along with the still waters, we get a picture of a shepherd who has provided the sheep with plenty of food and drink so now they can just rest. The sheep, in other words, have been provided for so sufficiently that the only left for them to do is lie down. It would be like one of us sitting down before a perfectly prepared, mouth-watering rib-eye steak with a loaded baked potato on the side, along with a buttery ear of corn seasoned just right, and of course, a slice of warm homemade bread sitting atop the plate. You even have a fresh, green salad with your favorite salad dressing to go along with the meal. Now imagine yourself sitting at a table before such a meal and all you can say is, no thanks. I don't know about you, but there would only be one thing that would stop me from devouring that meal and that would be that I am already satisfied. That's the picture, ladies and gentlemen, of sheep lying down in green pastures. They are not grazing. They are not drinking from the still waters. They just lying down surrounded by green pastures and still water. Why? Because they're completely satisfied. They have eaten all that they need. The shepherd has provided for them sufficiently.

Doesn't our Shepherd do the same for us. God causes us to lie down in green pastures for He satisfies our every need and more. There isn't anything that we need for which God has not provided. God has given us food to eat and water to drink. God has given us clothes to wear and has made provision for all our cares. No, maybe we don't have everything that we ever wanted. Maybe we don't have every luxury that we ever craved. But God, our good Shepherd, Yahweh-Ra /ah, has given us more than enough. The question is, are we satisfied?

Brethren, sometimes we are not satisfied like we should be. There are at least three reasons for this.

- **Worldliness** – We touched on contentment a moment ago. Why aren't some Christians content? Why is it that some want more and more no matter how much they get? It is because they get sucked into the whirlwind of worldliness. Listen to me: the things of this world cannot satisfy you, no matter how much you accumulate (**Eccl. 5:10**).
- **Wants** – Sometimes it is not just that we want more, it is that we want something different. Our wants don't line up with what God gives us and so we become unsatisfied. The Israelites of old fell into this ditch (**Num. 11:4-6**). If we are not careful, we can find ourselves developing the same complaints as the Israelites. We realize that God has given us all that we need. He has given us bread for our living, but we want the bread that the world can offer. We drink plentifully from the still waters of God's provisions, but still we want

something different. We want to drink from fountains that we have built with our own hands instead of relying on the provisions of God.

*Jer 2:13*

*For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves...*

Listen: God gives us plenty, in fact, as we stated before, God gives us more than we need, but we must learn to be satisfied with what He is offering.

- **Wrong source** – Sometimes we are not satisfied with what God has done for us because we give credit to the wrong source for our blessings (**Duet. 8:11-18**).

Illus.

A boy was bringing home a loaf of bread. A man stopped him and asked, "What do you have there?" "A loaf of bread" the boy said. "Where did you get it?" "From the baker" was his response. "Well," the man inquired, "where did the baker get it?" "He made it." "Of what did he make it?" "Flour." "Where did he get the flour?" "From the miller." "Where did he get it?" "From the farmer." "Where did the farmer get it?" Finally the truth dawned to the boy and he said, "From God." "Well then," the man asked, "Where did you get that loaf of bread?" The boy said, "I got it from God." --Moody Monthly

Yes, God is the source of our blessings and our provisions and we should never forget it, for it reminds us that God is a great provider. As a good Shepherd, God has blessed us with what we need so that we can say with David, "*He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.*"

Now, this entire Psalm can be interpreted with both physical and spiritual applications. While some physical applications can be made of the next verse, verse 3, the spiritual application of it is far more beautiful and meaningful than a physical one.

#### **IV. "He restores my soul... (ver. 3a)**

Seeing that we are prone to go astray, these are words of the highest comfort. Who present here tonight has never wandered away from the safe presence of God and found yourself in the wilderness of waywardness? Who present here tonight has never strayed, even if it were just for a short period of time, and found yourself lost in the desert of disobedience? Who present here tonight has never, ever, ever meandered into the meadow of spiritual misbehavior? I'm asking you tonight who among us has never slipped into a moment of sin? If you stand up and say "me," I must politely call you a liar because John said, "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*" (**1 Jn. 1:8**). You see, we all, like sheep, have gone astray. Thank God, we have Yahweh-Ra /ah. Thank God, we have a Shepherd who is willing and able to restore our soul.

Now, let's emphasize just who does the restoring in this process. Listen me: it's not you and it's not your brethren and it's not chance. The one who does the restoring is Yahweh. When you sin, you cannot restore yourself. There is something you have to do in order to be restored, but you can't restore yourself. Now, let's be clear, when we go astray and need restoring, we are not passive in the restoring process. Listen to Peter.

*Acts 3:19*

*Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out.*

The words *repent* and *turn again* are Greek verbs in the active voice indicating something we must do ourselves. Now, Peter is speaking to those who have never obeyed the gospel so the action is different, but the requirements of repenting and turning again are the same for Christians who have gone astray. In other words, alien sinners must repent and be baptized (**Acts 2:38**), while Christians who sin must repent and pray God (**Acts 8:22**), but the point is we must do something. We must do what God requires. But even after we do that, we must still rely on God for restoration. The words *may be blotted out* are in the passive voice, referring to something that is done to and for us. And this is when we are restored, that is, when our sins are blotted out, and again only our good Shepherd can do that.

"Phillip Keller, in his *mentioned book*, explains this by the situation known to shepherds as a "cast (or cast down) sheep." What 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." In this position gases build up in the body, cutting off circulation to the legs, and often it is only a matter of a few hours before the sheep dies. The only one who can restore the sheep to health is the shepherd" (Boice Expository Commentary - An Expository Commentary – Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1-41).

Thank God, the Lord is our Shepherd so that when we find ourselves on our backs, sort-of-speak, pawing frantically to get back on our feet, the Lord comes along and picks us up. Listen to me: David knew something about the picking-up power of the Lord. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and even arranged for the murder of her husband Uriah, but upon his repentance, the Lord picked him up. Peter knew something about the picking-up power of the Lord. He denied Jesus thrice, even swearing that he didn't know Him, but upon his repentance, the Lord picked him up. Paul knew a little something about the picking-up power of the Lord. He persecuted the church, even dragging men and women to prison, but upon his repentance and obedience to the gospel, the Lord picked him up. You see, the Lord has a history of picking up his people when they fall. No wonder David said, "*He restores my soul.*" And make no mistake about it, Yahweh is still in the business of restoration. Listen to me: No matter how far we fall, no matter what we do or how many times we have done it, God will restore our soul, but we must do our part and repent, and then He is

faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. But our Shepherd does more than just restore us.

**V. *He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake (ver. 3b).***

In the Hebrew *paths of righteousness* is literally “*right paths.*” The words imply that there are right paths and wrong paths in life. Thus, we should choose the paths that we walk very carefully. Listen to me: there is a path that leads to destruction, and Jesus tells us that this is the path most frequently followed.

*Matt 7:13*

*Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.*

Why is the path that leads to destruction travelled by the majority? I'll tell you why? It's the easy path. The easy path is the path where you can do your own thing and live your own life. It is the path where there are no instructions to follow or commands to keep. It is the path where there are no sacrifices that have to be made or suffering that has to be endured. It is the path that is full of flattery and friends and fun and frolic. It is the path, ladies and gentlemen, that is so attractive that most people think that it must be right. But listen to the wise man:

*Prov 14:12*

*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.*

Who might lead you into this way to death? Well, certainly false teachers will lead you that way. Denominational churches, all of which were established at the wrong time, the wrong place, and by the wrong people, will lead you that way. An untrained conscience will lead you that way. A deceived self will lead you that way. Even family or friends might inadvertently lead you that way. But here is one thing we can be sure about—God, our Shepherd will never lead us that way, for Yahweh only leads us into paths of righteousness. This might be a path that is difficult sometimes. It might be path that involves some hard decisions to make or some heartbreak and disappointment that must be endured once in a while, but it is a path that leads us to a better place.

Now, before we move on, we must ask one more question—how does our Shepherd lead us? This is a very important question and there are many who are giving the wrong answer today. Some say that God leads us miraculously by the Holy Spirit. Some say that God leads us by speaking directly to us in an audible voice. The truth is, God leads us by His Word and today that would be His written Word.

*Ps 119:105*

*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.*

*Proverbs 4:11 (KJV)*

*11 I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths.*

Our Shepherd leads us in the right paths by the teaching of His Word found in this book we call the Bible. If you want to make sure that you are on the right path, then make sure that you are following the Word of God. Study your Bible. Instill God's Word into your mind and keep it there. Don't follow denominational creeds, follow the Bible. Don't follow the mandates of man-made churches, follow the Bible. Don't follow the popular TV evangelists of our day, follow the Bible. Listen to me: Don't follow Don Wright or any other preacher, follow the Bible. By His Word God will lead you to paths of righteousness that will end in the green pastures of heaven after a while.

**VI. *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me (Ps 23:4).***

On the way to green pastures and still waters, the shepherd might have to lead the sheep through dangerous territory. Why? Does the shepherd lead the sheep through life threatening territory because he gets lax and careless? No. He does so because sometimes that's the only way to get to the green pastures. But there are two things, no matter what we have to go through in life, about which we can be sure:

First, God is with us. The presence of God should allay all of our fears. Certainly we don't have to fear man.

The presence of God should give us the strength to stand up for Jesus in any crowd. The presence of God should give us the fortitude to fight against any foe. The presence of God should give us the courage to conquer any complication that arise in life. And one thing we can be sure about is that God is with us. Why? Because He is our Shepherd and a good shepherd never lets his sheep out of his sight (**Psa. 139:7-12**).

Second, David was not afraid, even when he found himself in the valley of the shadow of death, because he said, "*your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*" The rod and the staff of God symbolize His power and strength and authority. David was comforted, not just because he was in the presence of a god, but he was in the presence of THE God, and he was mindful of God's great and awesome power. Remember, we are not just in the presence of Yahweh-Ra/ah, that is, the Lord our Shepherd, but we are in the presence of Elohim, the one who created the heavens and the earth by the power of His Word. God also calls Himself El-Shaddai, a name that means God Almighty because He gave Abraham a son when he was 100 years old. The point of all this is simply that we find ourselves walking in the valley of the shadow of death, let's remember that we are in the presence of a great and almighty God who is watching over us. David knew this about God and so he was able to say, "*I will fear no evil.*"

## **Conclusion:**

Can we say with David, "The Lord is my Shepherd?" I hope we can. I hope we can say it with passion and sincerity, believing all that it means to be under the watchful care of God.

A famous actor was once the guest of honor at a social gathering where he received many requests to recite favorite excerpts from various literary works. An old preacher who happened to be there asked the actor to recite the twenty-third Psalm. The actor agreed on the condition that the preacher would also recite it. The actor's recitation was beautifully intoned with great dramatic emphasis for which he received lengthy applause. The preacher's voice was rough and broken from many years of preaching, and his delivery was anything but polished. But when he finished there was not a dry eye in the room. When someone asked the actor what made the difference, he replied "I know the psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."

Is the Lord your shepherd?