

A Shepherd's Shepherd

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want."

That is the first verse of the familiar 23rd Psalm, a psalm written by King David. Before he was a king, while still young, David was trained to handle and provide for his father's sheep. That training involved the sheep, of course, but also personal training with the rod and staff, the tools of the professional shepherd.

Some artwork is a little misleading, showing the job of shepherding as one of constant tranquility. Pictures often depict docile animals with the shepherd sitting under a shade tree by a calm stream, happily meditating on....

While there would be times of tranquility, the job of the shepherd was not a bed of ease. When his sheep were secure and out of harm's way, he would often be out searching for green pasture and fresh water. Along his journey he would be in constant thought about the path over which he would lead his sheep. He would be aware of obstacles and potential dangers; his mind always reflecting upon the good of the sheep.

When with his sheep he would watch for potential problems. He would take inventory frequently in case one wandered off. He would constantly scan his surroundings for potential predators.

The shepherd would have long tiring days and his nightly sleep could be interrupted at any moment by predators or thieves or even a startled sheep.

The shepherd was provider and protector; leader and disciplinarian. He looked beyond the present moment and place, providing security and comfort even when the sheep could not see and understand his actions and thoughts. He knew his sheep, and the sheep knew the one who deeply cared for them.

Sheep are commonly depicted in artwork as soft, playful, clean, and calm creatures. In reality, they

are dirty, stinking animals that are easily agitated. They can become nervous if other sheep are too close. They are easily frightened by an unfamiliar sound or quick movement, and especially the presence of a predator.

A sheep might find a comfortable place in a field and fiercely defend its position. It might also graze aimlessly, wandering off and becoming lost.

Sheep might drink from a muddy puddle with a clean water source within view. They are known to be easy prey for their adversaries. Sheep are dumb.

In one sense it is a marvel that David declared that he had a shepherd. In doing so, he declared himself to be a dumb, stinking, helpless sheep. Of all the animals he could have chosen, the sheep is among the least flattering. And yet, he was not writing about sheep; he was not writing about himself. He knew his own helplessness, and he recognized the Lord as his Shepherd.

He did not declare 'God' to be his shepherd. He did not write 'Master' or the Hebrew word for 'Lord.' He wrote God's name. He enjoyed a personal and intimate relationship with his God.

It is the nature of sheep to know their master's voice to the exclusion of any other. So it is with David. In declaring his God to be his shepherd, he excluded all other gods. Nothing else would be his master. He would hear only the voice of God.

The entire psalm is contained in the first line. David names his God as his shepherd and then declares his contentment. With God as his shepherd he would be nourished, protected, and disciplined. Even when he could not see or understand the way, he would have confidence in his Shepherd...for **...The LORD is my shepherd.**

Mark Stinnett

