

## WHEN I NEED COMFORT Psalm 23:1-6

Objective: To teach us to look to God when comfort is needed.

You've heard the expression "free as bird" and may have thought about how great it would be to not have concerns about all the problems and needs we have in life. Actually, a bird spends most of his waking hours searching for food. So maybe, that is not such a good example. There are multitude of problems and needs that are just a part of life. You might be able to argue that all living things to some degree have problems or needs. The unmet needs or unsolved problems tend to produce anxiety or lack of peace. Many have claimed that the stress resulting from such anxiety leads to health problems - physical and mental. We could define "comfort" as a condition in which we are free of such anxieties.

Is it possible to have needs and problems and not be anxious about them? In rare occasions, a person may just be oblivious to the needs and problems. That's not a good condition to be in. Say for example, you are hungry. If you have food in the refrigerator or cabinet, then the hunger does not produce anxiety. On the other hand if the cupboard is bare and the wallet is empty, then you probably will be anxious about it. In this simple example, what we learn is that the realization of the availability of sufficient provisions provided the comfort that was needed.

Can we generalize this learning to any problem or need we might encounter in life? In a sense, this is what Psalm 23 is about. In these six verses we will discover that God provides (1-2), God comforts (3-4) and God secures (5-6).

### GOD PROVIDES

<sup>1</sup> A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. <sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. Psalm 23:1-2 (NASB95)

The claim David made that "the Lord is my shepherd" was stated in a single hyphenated Hebrew word: **Jehovah-Rohi**. Many of the names of the Lord given to us in the Old Testament are descriptive of his provision and character. Various English words have been used in addition to shepherd when this Hebrew word was translated. Most of the time, the word used is "feed" which is a description of what a shepherd does for his sheep. Another common synonym for shepherd is pastor. A more general term that is used in the definition of the word translated as shepherd is to "tend" or to "keep" in the sense of preserve and protect. This is getting closer to what many of think of as the role of the shepherd. He preserves, protects and feeds the sheep.

If the omnipotent Creator of the universe is the One Who is keeping, tending and providing for you, then the inevitable conclusion is that you have everything you need. You may not have everything you wish for, but your needs will be met. If we really believe that, then anxiety should not be a factor in our lives. Therefore, we can say with David, "I shall not want." This idea is reinforced when we consider that one of the names of God given to us in the Old Testament is **Jehovah-jihre** which literally means the Lord, my provider.

In viewing the Lord as our shepherd, we are (by default) viewing ourselves as sheep. We've heard the negative descriptions of sheep as being weak, defenseless, and foolish. While these are true descriptors, there are some positives to consider also. In order for a person to be considered one of the Lord's sheep one has to have a different nature than that typically used to describe mankind. Natural or unconverted man is more like a wolf or a goat rather than a sheep. As C. H. Spurgeon points out, "A sheep is an object of property, not a wild animal; its owner sets great store by it, and frequently it is bought with a great price."

David's assertion that the Lord is the shepherd of His people is affirmed by Christ Himself in John 10:11 and 14 when He said, "I am the Good Shepherd."

We could think of the second verse as examples of what the shepherd does so that the sheep do not have unmet needs. The first example of makes or lets or causes us to lie down in green pastures is brimming with implications for our spiritual well-being and how God provides for us.

The first thing we see is God's **provision** and His abundance. Just as the sheep have their fill without the necessity of searching all day for just a sprig of grass, we find that God provides (from His storehouse) the necessities so that we can find rest in Him. In *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Phillip Keller tells us of four requirements that have to be met before sheep will lie down in an open field. They must be free from fear, they must be in harmony with each other, they must be free of torment from parasites and they must be well fed.

There are some obvious spiritual applications for us in the church or in our lives as individuals. What does it take to have freedom from fear. Two things come to mind: One possibility is that there are no immediate threats. If we think in terms of sheep, they would sense a threat if they heard wolves howling in the area or if they saw a bear close to the flock. An obvious way to eliminate such threats is to remove the predators from the area.

How would we do this in our own culture? How can we keep the predators far enough away so that we do not live in fear? When you start to think of possibilities, then you realize that getting rid of immediate threats is easier said than done.

The other possibility to have freedom from fear is to know that the wolves and the bears will not be able to hurt you because the shepherd is able to protect the sheep. This protection can work only if the sheep do not wander off from the flock and the watchful eye of the shepherd. Applying this criteria to our own lives, then we would conclude that we must stay close to God through our prayer and devotional life and not drift away into areas of spiritual danger.

Relative to living in harmony with each other, sheep have a "butting order" in which the dominant larger ewes will try to "boss" around the others in order to get the best grazing area or bedding grounds. When the shepherd makes his presence known, then the attention of the sheep are diverted and the disputes stop. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to see how much like sheep people are when it comes to internal friction in a group.

Both cattle and sheep are bothered by flies and the situation is helped with the application of oil that contains some type of bug repellent. You may have noticed that people are "bugged" by any number things that cause distractions and prevent us from having peace of mind. What kind of bug repellent oil is available for us to put on that will get rid of those things that "bug" us? The obvious answer is that the presence of the Holy Spirit will not only help us to avoid getting agitated by the pesky problems of life but will many times drive away those who are the source of the problems.

If sheep are to be well fed, then the shepherd has to either search out and find the best pastures in an open range environment or he will need to do a lot of work on his own land to maintain the pasture land to produce nourishing grass rather than weeds. In a spiritual sense, we have to follow the Good Shepherd's lead as the word is sown in our hearts so that it will bear nourishment for our spiritual growth. If we look at this aspect of shepherding as it applies to a church, then we could argue that the pastors have the role of the shepherds and it is incumbent

upon them to provide good nourishing spiritual food or at least an environment where the members are encouraged to eat healthy food.

Not only do we need food that will nourish and help us grow and have energy to do what needs to be done in life, but we also need water for the body to function properly. In the word of God we find both solid food and living waters. As we graze on the word we find aspects of it that help us become stronger in our faith and develop a deeper understanding of the principles of the Kingdom of God. We also find wisdom regarding how to successfully go about living and how to deal with current needs. The “grass” of the word helps us to mature while the “water” of the word is essential for living life in a meaningful way.

Sheep like to graze early in the morning when there is abundant dew on the grass. In this way, they get both the grass and the water. When that is not enough, then the shepherd must deliberately take (lead) the sheep to a place of refreshment when they can drink deeply. This may be a place the shepherd had previously worked on to create a quiet pool of water from a swiftly running stream. It is essential that the shepherd lead them to a safe place to drink because, on their own, the sheep find wind up drinking polluted water that may make them sick or die. The spiritual implications of such concerns are obvious.

If the “still waters” represent the peace we have because of our relationship with God, then we can point to another name for God, **Jehovah-shalom** which means, the Lord, my Peace.

## GOD COMFORTS

<sup>3</sup> He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. <sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. Psalm 23:3-4 (NASB95)

(Aside: It seems that the first part of verse three could be associated with the last part of verse two. The soul restoration would be the outcome of drinking deeply at the “peaceful waters.” The second part of verse three (“He guides me in paths of righteousness”) seems to be a spiritual parallel statement of “He leads me besides the still waters.”)

Another aspect of restoration of the soul is related to the problem sheep have when they lie down and something occurs that they wind up on their backs. The terminology for this condition is that the sheep is “cast.” This is probably what David referred to in Psalms 41:11 when he wrote, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me?” The equivalent condition for a person is severe depression or despair. Just as a sheep needs the shepherd to roll it over so that it can get back on its feet, we need help in coming out of depression.

In the Psalm 41 verse, the remedy David recommended was “Hope thou in God.” God’s action on our behalf in restoring us speaks of the fact that all healing comes from Him. He is called **Jehovah-rapha**, the Lord, my Healer, in Exodus 15:26

If you have ever been around a farm that had sheep or cattle, you have probably noticed the paths where grass doesn’t grow because the animals have followed the same trail day after day and these paths become ruts. Because of the continued use of such paths these area may become pretty dirty (for obvious reasons) and this can be a source of health problems for the flock of the herd. It is the responsibility the shepherd to lead the sheep in paths that are good for them and to make sure that they do not over graze a particular area of the pasture.

I don't guess people would ever get into a rut and wind up over grazing a particular teaching of the Bible. (You know that is not so.) If that were to happen, then problems can develop in that over emphasis of one doctrine can lead to people being spiritually malnourished in all areas except that one. The other possibility is that such over emphasis can lead to erroneous conclusions because the full council of the word of God is not taken into account. Once again, it becomes the responsibility of the pastor or teacher to provide a balance so that the members are truly led in the right paths. On an individual basis we can look to **Jehovah-tsidkneu**, the Lord, my Righteousness as the One Who will always lead us in paths of righteousness.

In taking the sheep from one pasture to another, it was sometimes necessary to go through rough terrain. This was typically done toward the end of spring so the flock could feed in the high country meadows. There may have been narrow passages or mountain passes that they had to go through to get to the new pasture. Of course this process would need to be reversed in the fall before the snow started to fall in the high meadows. Going through the dangerous passes was part of what was entailed in getting from one place to another. The testimony of the sheep was that the presence of the shepherd with his rod and staff eliminated the fear of the danger that was around them.

We have transitions in our lives in which we go from one status to another and the path to get there is sometime filled with uncertainty and perhaps some peril. It is good to know that someone is there to help you get through these situations. Our first inclination is that "Hey, I can do this." Then when things get a little rough, you may start thinking, I need to ask someone what I need to do. You may not have an advisor whom you would trust simply because the advisor hasn't made this same transition that you are making. It is usually when we are at the end our own ideas and resources that we come to the realization that we have help from the Good Shepherd. We need to get to the place in our spiritual maturity that we think of Him as the first option when help is needed.

This verse regarding the valley of the shadow of death also has application to the end of physical life experience that all will have barring the rapture. Of all the changes that we experience in life, this is the ultimate transition and, for many, it is a pretty scary thing. You'd have trouble finding someone who could say, "Been there, done that." However, there is One and He is the Good Shepherd. Our comfort comes from the knowledge found in the words, "Thou art with me." The name of the Lord that describes this is **Jehovah-shammah** which means "the Lord Who is there."

The administration of the comfort that is a result of the Lord being there with us is through His rod and His staff. The rod was a relatively short club the shepherd uses to drive away any animal that might try to attack the sheep. The staff was the long stick with a crook on the end that was used to reach and lift (or pull back) a sheep or lamb that was in trouble. In a sense the Holy Spirit uses the word of God to accomplish both these functions.

## GOD SECURES

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows. <sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Psalm 23:5-6 (NASB95)

If the sheep are to be healthy, grow and reproduce, then safe and adequate food must be

provided. The shepherd prepared the pasture by removing anything detrimental to the sheep. Oil was poured on the head of the sheep to discourage flies and other insects from bothering them. For us, we can find spiritual nourishment in the word of God and can look forward to the time of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. We have been anointed with the "oil" of the Holy Spirit Who fills our lives and overflows to bless others.

The character God manifested to those who love Him is only goodness and mercy. These twin characteristics find their ultimate conclusion in our being with God throughout all eternity. The Good News is that by appropriating Jesus as the Good Shepherd of our lives, then we enjoy a measure of these benefits day by day.