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Psalm 23:1a
CW 304

“The LORD Is My Shepherd”

- 👁 **His credentials**
- 👁 **His right to ownership**
- 👁 **His mark of possession**

In the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, dear sheep:

People who first heard the Bible were simple farmers and ranchers familiar with nature. But most of us are urbanized without knowing sheep or shepherds. What does it really mean to say, “**The LORD Is My Shepherd**”? Books like *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* can be a great blessing. Author, Phillip Keller, grew up in East Africa surrounded by simple, native shepherds much like those of Bible times. Years later he bought a cattle ranch in British Columbia, Canada, but could not afford to buy cattle for it. To support himself and his wife, he had to become a shepherd. For eight years, Keller learned about ownership, responsibility and sheep. As a lay preacher, his firsthand experiences unfolded the treasures of Psalm 23 to a spiritual “flock.” He’s probably the first “down-to-earth, hard-handed sheep man ever” to write at length about the Shepherd’s Psalm. I pray that Keller’s insights in our summer sermon series named after his book will give our “flock” bold appreciation, admiration and affection in saying, “**The LORD Is My Shepherd.**”

👁 **His credentials**

Have you heard the expression: “Let go and let God”? Easier said than done. Guilt over past failures along with sinfulness inherited from our parents built a wall between us sinful creatures and the holy God. By nature we are as unresponsive to God’s goodness as a border collie Keller wrote about in *Lessons from a Sheep Dog*.² We cannot change our fear to bravery, or rid ourselves of chains we earn for running away. God alone can work this miraculous change in the fear-shackled heart of a sinner. He has chosen to build our trust in two simple ways we call the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. Grace-filled words like these in Psalm 23 enable us to love and trust in God as our dear Shepherd.

But who is the LORD that we should turn over all our worries and cares with the confidence to say, “**The LORD Is My Shepherd.**”? The LORD is Jehovah (Yahweh), the God of free and faithful grace who lets us see Him in the person of His Son Jesus Christ. And Jesus says, “**I am the Good Shepherd.**” He gently turns our fearful gaze upward to see **His credentials** as the LORD who created, controls and preserves the entire universe. There is no more qualified and able Shepherd than the God who created our souls.

King David who wrote Psalm 23 had also been a shepherd. He knew from experience how the entire life of any sheep hangs on the skill, the kindness, the brave, selfless devotion of the shepherd. Keller tells of sheep on the other side of his fence in the care of a tenant shepherd who should never have been given the responsibility. The thin, weak victims of disease and parasites stared blankly through the woven wire to the lush green pastures on Keller’s side, almost bleating, “Oh, to be set free from this awful shepherd!” But sheep like us can see our Good Shepherd’s caring skill in 250,000,000 x 250,000,000 stars. His life-giving love powers billions upon billions of micro-organisms all around us. Yet for all the things he has to care for, He cares most for you and me. His cross gives no hope to the stars, no comfort to microbes. It says nothing

¹ Keller, Philip. *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Zondervan Publ. House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970. Available from NPH, 1-800-662-6022. Also at Amazon / Audible Books. First in Summer Sermon Series by Pastor Mark A. Cordes.

² Also at Amazon. Keller’s summary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nYp-KTXG6k&t=88s>.

to the animals. But to the sheep of His pasture, the cross of Jesus makes us proud to say, “**The LORD Is My Shepherd.**” Creation and the cross are all the **credentials** He needs.

👁 **His right to ownership**

Who can count the number of sheep who simply refuse to admit **His right to ownership**? If they do not believe in the LORD God as their Creator, how can they desire that He own them in this close, intimate relationship between Shepherd and sheep? They hate anyone having ownership or authority over them. And unfortunately, even Christians in His flock still shy away from giving the Good Shepherd complete control over their lives. What right does Jesus have to tell us what is good for us or harmful?

Keller recalls the days of the Depression when he bought his first thirty ewes with cash earned from blood, sweat and tears drawn from His own body. The day he bought them he realized that he would have to continually lay down his life for them to flourish and prosper. Many folks feel sheep can easily get by on their own. But sheep more than any other class of livestock need endless attention and meticulous care.

Consider how earnestly Jesus the Good Shepherd asserted **His right of ownership** by His laying down His life and shedding His blood. He continually intercedes for us, constantly laying Himself out for us, guiding us by His Holy Spirit, even working at night on our behalf. 24/7/365 without slowing down a bit, without tiring at all, the LORD keeps caring for His own. Our Good Shepherd constantly hears our bleating for help even in things that may seem small and insignificant. He will even provide for all our needs at all times. Who else deserves **His right of ownership**? We rejoice to say, “**The LORD Is My Shepherd.**” God’s tremendous devotion makes Psalm 23 our own “Hymn of Praise to Divine Diligence.”

👁 **His mark of possession**

Why would anyone choose to suffer in the **possession** of another shepherd if he knew the character of Christ? Don’t read other books about Him until you’ve read the four short biographies inspired by the Holy Spirit through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. See Jesus’ enormous compassion, incredible integrity. Was there ever a man so balanced, so beloved, so great with dignity and self assurance? With no formal education, no economic assets or political/military power, this God-Man changed history for countless millions of sheep marked for slaughter. Now by Word and Sacrament He is leading us to pastures green and eternal. From lives of death and decay He rescued us for the new life of decency and honor. Gentle, tender, true, he could also be “stern as steel, and terribly tough on phony people....He came to set men free from their own sins, their own selves, their own fears. Those so liberated loved Him with fierce loyalty.”

Could you let such a Shepherd put on you **His mark of possession**? For Keller and his sheep it was an unpleasant task of laying the ear of a ewe on a wooden block and notching it deeply with the razor-sharp shepherd’s knife. Recall Moses’ Old Testament Law for a slave who loved his master and family. At a doorpost the judge would shove an awl through his ear to mark him for life as a slave to that master. (Exodus 21:2-6) From such mutual suffering Keller had a permanent **mark of possession** in a close, caring relationship with his sheep. They depended on him and he cared for them with a shepherd’s heart.

We don’t have to put our ear on a block. The Lord’s Apostle Paul says, “*You also were included with Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with the seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory*” (Ephesians 1:13f). The Holy Spirit we receive in the Word or in the visible Gospel-water of Baptism is our Good Shepherd’s **mark of possession**. “In the name of the Father...Son...Holy Spirit” means we belong to the LORD forever.

He has the **credentials**, the **right of ownership**. And we have **His mark of possession**. By faith we can let go and rest in His arms with a contented sigh, “**The LORD Is My Shepherd.**” Amen.

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