

THE LORD PROVIDES**PSALM 23:1**

How many of you have heard the proverb “familiarity breeds contempt”? It usually applies to relationships. We can sometimes know a person so well and for so long that we lose respect or appreciation for him or her. But it can also apply to things in general. Here’s a question. Can you fail to really hear and appreciate some very well-known passages in the Bible because you’ve heard or read them so often? I think so. Maybe “contempt” is too strong a word. When it comes to well-known verses or passages in the Bible, maybe it’s more accurate to say familiarity breeds boredom. Familiarity breeds indifference. Freedom breeds a lack of interest.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent – a period of time every year when Christians all over the year get spiritually prepared for the central event of our faith – the death and resurrection of Jesus. This year I want you to reflect with me on one of the most well-known and beloved passages in the Bible – Psalm 23. It’s only six verses long, so we’re going to look at it a verse at a time. Yes, it’s one of the most well-known passages in the Bible, but don’t let familiarity breed indifference or a lack of interest. Don’t assume you already know everything about Psalm 23 there is to know.

Today, I’ve put all of Psalm 23 up on the screen for us to read together in unison even though we’re going to focus on just the first verse only. What does Psalm 23 have to do with Good Friday and Easter? How can it help us understand the death and resurrection of Jesus better? The prevailing image is God as a shepherd and we being like His sheep. Jesus adopted the image of a shepherd and linked it with what He did. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11 NLT) By the same token, sheep – specifically, lambs – were sacrificed as part of Jewish worship. An innocent, perfect lamb was killed in order to pay for the people’s sins. Jesus’ death on the cross was the supreme and ultimate act of sacrifice. He paid the penalty for your sin and mine for all eternity. That’s why Jesus is sometimes referred to as a lamb in Scripture. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to be baptized, he said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 NLT) In another place, it says, “Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us.” (1 Cor. 5:7 NLT)

Whenever possible I like to invite you to sample some of the resources that are helpful to me. I want to recommend to you a spiritual and devotional classic on Psalm 23. It’s entitled *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. It was written by W. Phillip Keller who passed away in 1997. He actually owned a sheep ranch and worked as a shepherd in British Columbia for a period of time among many other pursuits in life. He points out something we often forget. Much of the Bible’s terminology and teaching is couched in the language of the countryside, the out-of-doors, and of nature itself. Most of us here today live and work in a city or suburban environment. As a result, we’re often largely unfamiliar with livestock, crops, land, fruit, or wildlife. That puts us at a disadvantage in understanding parts of the Bible well. We need to understand the images found in Psalm 23 so we can then understand the deep, profound spiritual truths to which they point. Let’s focus on verse 1 so we can understand what it says about the Lord. The

Lord provides. Yes, but what does He provide? For me, two great truths emerge. Here's the first one.

JESUS PROVIDES A SPECIAL IDENTITY

“The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.” (NIV) That one, little sentence tells us God desires to take comprehensive care of His people. In thinking about God and His character, David, who wrote Psalm 23, preferred the image of a shepherd here rather than a more remote figure like a great king or a mighty deliverer. David could have depicted God as an inanimate object like a rock or a shield which he actually does in other psalms. Now, David had actually worked and lived as a shepherd when he was a young man. Like the prophet, Isaiah, the image of God as a shepherd was meaningful to him. “He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.” (Is. 40:11 NLT) Being a shepherd implies a personal relationship. Being a shepherd implies personal involvement. Being a shepherd implies personal sacrifice.

Jesus helped us understand this imagery at a deeper level when he called Himself the good shepherd. Weren't all shepherds good? Absolutely not! Jesus put it like this, “A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep.” (John 10:12-13 NLT) Being a shepherd back in Bible times wasn't easy work. Shepherds were required to live right alongside their sheep for months at a time often in isolated areas where the shepherd could find pasture. Sheep require a lot of personal care because they're not very bright animals, frankly. Sheep are utterly defenseless creatures – easy prey for wolves or hyenas. Because they're valuable, thieves want to steal them. So, in addition to hard, thankless work that involved a 24 hour a day job description, a good shepherd sometimes lost his life defending his flock. It was so easy to be an irresponsible, careless shepherd in Bible times that hiring a good shepherd was very difficult.

Did you hear about a flock of over 1300 sheep who had to be rounded up by police in a small Spanish city last summer after their shepherd fell asleep? The police were alerted to the presence of this extremely large flock of sheep attempting to negotiate the streets in the center of this small town at around 4:30 am. The dozing shepherd was supposed to be keeping the animals in check outside the city while he waited for the clock to strike 7:00 am. He was then supposed to guide the sheep into the surrounding hills where his flock would graze during the hot summer months. The police eventually found the shepherd who was still peacefully slumbering. Together the embarrassed shepherd and police officers were eventually able to extract the sheep from the city streets and return them to their pastures. That story reminds me of how the Bible describes God, “Indeed, he who watches over Israel never slumbers or sleeps.” (Ps 121:4 NLT)

Jesus is the good Shepherd. Meaning what? God isn't some remote deity living way off in some distant part of the Universe who could care less about you. Not at all.

Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus actually lives with you providing everything necessary for your care and welfare – physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. I’m told that sheep don’t take care of themselves at all. They require, more than any other class of livestock, endless attention and meticulous care. Just like people, sheep are fearful by nature, are very capable of being both stubborn and stupid, can easily develop bad habits, and are very susceptible to peer pressure from other sheep! Sound like anyone you know? And yet, there’s nothing harsh, abusive, or exploitative about God’s care of you and me. He is your ultimate provider, guide, protector, and guide. Like a good shepherd, Jesus has a special attachment to each of His sheep. A good shepherd sometimes gave personal names to each animal. They recognized the sound of his voice immediately and were often afraid of anyone else. Back in Bible times, most sheep weren’t slaughtered for food, but instead were tended carefully for their wool. As a result, most sheep lived in a flock until they just got old and died. If a sheep wandered away and got lost, a good shepherd willingly and enthusiastically went after it.

Perhaps the most wonderful word in all of Psalm 23 is one of its smallest. It’s the word “my.” The Lord is my shepherd. Do you rejoice in, exult over, and brag about who you belong to? Just think about it. God, the creator of the vast and magnificent universe in which we live, is deeply concerned about you as a specific, individual person. The staggering fact is that Jesus condescends to call Himself my Shepherd and invites me to consider myself one of His sheep – a special object of His affection and attention. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father.” (John 10:15 NLT) The Bible says God created you in your mother’s womb. Then, He sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to die on a cross to pay the penalty of your sin. The Bible even says, “All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all.” (Is. 53:6 NLT) But our good Shepherd’s comprehensive care doesn’t end even there. The Bible says He continues to answer our prayers and guide us through His Spirit this day and every day. He’s always working on our behalf many times in ways that we will never fully recognize this side of Heaven.

Now, if I’m happy and blest to acknowledge the Lord as my shepherd, then it must mean I’m also happy to fully acknowledge that I’m one of His sheep. I learned this week that you can’t brand a sheep like you can a cow. Too much wool! Nevertheless, shepherds did mark their sheep in Bible times. They cut a unique notch in the sheep’s ear. An earmark told everyone to what specific shepherd a sheep belonged. It’s amazing how many people love the idea of the Lord being their shepherd who don’t understand the implication. Yes, it says something about who God is. But it says just as much about who you are! Sheep aren’t wild animals. They’re valuable creatures frequently bought at a great price by their shepherd – their owner. Nobody just belongs to Jesus’ flock automatically. It’s a choice you make. You have to become one of His sheep. How does that happen? You recognize that you’re a lost sinner who can’t make yourself acceptable to an absolutely holy God. You throw yourself upon God’s mercy and grace. You put your trust in the fact that Jesus’ death on the cross paid the penalty for your personal sins. Then, with the Holy Spirit now living in you, you make every effort to live the life of a disciple – submissive to and productive for your Shepherd.

So, does Jesus put a mark of ownership on you and me? Not a literal, physical one like an earmark. But there is a mark of ownership. Think of it as the mark of the cross on your life and mine. Jesus put it like this, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me.” (Mk. 8:34 NLT) I’m no longer my own boss. Remember that as you come forward today to receive communion. Yes, it’s all about remembering what Jesus has done for us and receiving God’s forgiveness for my sins. But, it should also be a reminder that I have freely chosen to bear the mark of the cross on my life. That means something very fundamental. It means I can no longer live life the way I want to on my terms. I don’t get to enjoy all the benefits of Jesus’ comprehensive care while holding on to my foolish, self-centered way of life. I have an owner now. The Bible puts it like this, “You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price.” (1 Cor. 6:20 NLT) Is the mark of the cross on your life? Do you really belong to the good Shepherd? Do you recognize His ownership? Do you acknowledge His authority over and in your life? Let’s put the second half of verse one under the microscope. It reminds me that...

JESUS PROVIDES REAL CONTENTMENT.

The verse says, “I lack nothing.” (Ps. 23:1 NIV) or “I have all that I need.” (Ps 23:1 NLT) We know David wrote this psalm, but not when he wrote it. I’m convinced, however, that he wrote it late in his life after he’d experienced many of the tragic moments alluded to in the psalm like the valley of the shadow of death and being in the presence of his enemies. We love this psalm not because it’s some kind of a “let’s just think positively about life” poem, but rather because it seems to be written by someone who had been shaken by difficult life circumstances himself.

What’s David really saying here? Yes, David was greatly blessed throughout his life, but he also experienced some incredible hardships. For several years, the most powerful person in Israel – King Saul – wanted to kill David. David lived the life of a fugitive. He experienced great poverty and the loss of important relationships. He had so much blood on his hands from all the battles he fought that God didn’t want David to build the temple. David survived the betrayal of one of his sons, Absalom, who came within an inch of a successful coup d’état. When he wrote, “I have all that I need,” David didn’t mean to convey the idea that God’s people never have unmet desires or never experience lack in certain areas of life. That wasn’t true of David and it’s not true of any of God’s sheep. Remember, it was Jesus, the good Shepherd who promised His sheep, “Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows.” (John 16:33 NLT)

David is getting at something we call contentment. He is saying, “I am completely satisfied with the Lord’s management of my life. He’s like a good shepherd who delights in his flock. As I look back on my life, I realize God has always been there providing everything I truly need. What a Provider He’s been! He’s gone to no end of trouble and effort to supply me with everything that I truly needed just like a shepherd who makes sure his sheep have sufficient food and water and who are safe from their predators. Perhaps God hasn’t given me everything I want, but He’s given me everything I truly need.” Are you content this morning? I’m not asking you if everything

in your life is the way you want it to be. I'm not asking you if you have everything you want. I'm asking you if - despite the presence of problems, heartaches, and the lack of some things you want - are you content. Contentment can be the gracious possession of the man or the woman who has truly put everything about his or her life into the hands of the good Shepherd.

Here's a few truths about contentment that are important to remember today. First, real contentment is found in the presence of God in your life not in the absence of problems. Contentment equals no problems? If that was true, we'd never experience contentment because - this side of Heaven - there will always be problems. Nevertheless, we all tend to measure our contentment by our circumstances. If circumstances are good, we feel more content. If circumstances aren't good, we feel less content.

Second, real contentment is found in trusting in the character of God to provide you with all that you truly need. Perhaps you've heard the story of how immediately after World War 2, Allied armies gathered up many hungry, homeless children and put them in large camps. There the children were cared for and fed abundantly. But they didn't sleep well at night. They seemed anxious and afraid. Finally, a psychologist hit on a solution. After the kids were put to bed, they each received a slice of bread to hold. If they wanted more to eat, more was provided, but this particular slice wasn't to be eaten. It was just to hold. That slice of bread produced some amazing results. Each child would go to sleep subconsciously feeling he or she would have something to eat tomorrow. That assurance gave each child the opportunity to rest peacefully and well. Contentment is the result of knowing your good Shepherd already has tomorrow covered today. He knows where the pasture and the water is going to be. He's already made sure no poisonous weeds are in the grass and no wolves are hiding in the bushes. You don't have to worry about tomorrow because He's already seen to it.

Third, real contentment is found in admitting you can't meet your own needs. We can't work hard enough, be smart enough, save enough money, have enough friends, or be good enough to gain contentment through our own efforts. As a sheep is completely dependent on its shepherd, we come to the Lord realizing He meets every need - physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational. Like the sheep in Psalm 23, we lack nothing because we have the Lord. Here's a thought. If you feel you lack something of truly eternal value or importance today, there's only one of two explanations. One, you don't know the Lord - the good Shepherd - personally, or, two, you don't really need what you think you're lacking. Let's face it. We sometimes think something is necessary that God, in His wisdom, knows would be hurtful to us and so He mercifully doesn't provide it. God knows what His sheep need and when they need it. He'll provide your need at the right time and in the right way. That should produce contentment in your heart and mine.

Chronic discontent never ends well. Phillip Keller once owned a female sheep - a ewe - that he nicknamed Mrs. Gad-about. She was one of the most physically attractive sheep he ever owned. She provided excellent wool. She gave birth to sturdy lambs. But she had one fault. She was chronically discontent with her life. For example, she

became a “fence crawler.” What’s that? No matter how lush and green the field she was in, she was indeed convinced the grass was always greener on the other side of the fence. She’d find ways under the fence or around the fence and ended up feeding on brown, inferior, and unhealthy grass. It was problem enough to find and bring her back, but she taught her lambs to do the same thing. They followed her example of discontent and became fence crawlers, too. She even influenced other sheep in Keller’s flock to become fence crawlers. Finally, Keller realized he couldn’t allow his entire sheep ranch operation to get ruined by one chronically discontented sheep. Sadly, he had to put Mrs. Gad-about down. I’m not suggesting Jesus, the good Shepherd, knocks off discontented, backslidden Christians. But I am suggesting chronic discontent never ends well.

Fourth, real contentment must be learned. It doesn’t come naturally to any of us. It was the great Christian leader, Paul, who made that truth clear. He wrote, “I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength... And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:11-13, 19 NLT) Paul strikes me as being a naturally impetuous, ambitious, and passionate person who wasn’t easily content with much of anything or anyone including himself. Sometimes we describe a person like that as being driven. Driven people are rarely content. So, Paul had to learn how to be content just like you and me – probably very gradually and probably somewhat painfully at times.

In the fall of 2012, Bismark Mensah, a recent immigrant to the U.S. from Ghana, was working part-time job at a Wal-Mart near Seattle, Washington. As he collected shopping carts, Bismark often found personal items that customers had left behind—keys, credit cards, and wallets. But one afternoon he spotted an item that really grabbed his attention. It was a white envelope bulging with cash. Lots of cash—like \$20,000 in cash! Bismark could have used some of that cash. He came to the U.S. to study business administration so he could return to Ghana and help his mom expand her five small seamstress shops. By earning, at that time, \$9.05 per hour at Wal-Mart it would take him a long time to fulfill that dream. But Bismark said he never considered keeping the money. “My conscience wouldn’t allow it,” he said. “I couldn’t even drive home if I did that.” So, instead, he ran after the couple who had left the cash. As it turned out, they were going to use the money for a down payment on a house. Bismark said about the woman, “She was like, ‘Wow!’ Tears are coming out. She took some money out and tried to reward me. I said, ‘No, no. I’m all right.’” Bismark Mensah received Wal-Mart’s “Integrity in Action Award” and a promotion from \$9.05 to \$9.19 per hour—with benefits. But for Bismark the real rewards were more internal. He had this to say about his job: “In the parking lot, people chat, tell you their problems, you see that a person is not happy. I tell them, ‘God is in control. Everything is OK.’” God is in control. Everything is OK. Those are the words of a contented man. Can you say that about your life this morning? God is in control. Everything is OK. David put it like this, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.”