

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

By Sylvia Powell

This statement implies a working relationship between a human being and his maker. It means a mere mortal becomes the cherished object of divine love and diligence. We, as Saints, should understand this more than any other human being on earth for God has given us the restored gospel. Do we fully understand and appreciate this?

When David wrote this, himself being a shepherd, he was speaking of the Lord with great pride, devotion and admiration. It's like he was saying, "Look who my shepherd is—the Lord is! You see, David knew the lot in life of any particular sheep depended solely on the type of man who owned it. In this instance the great "I Am" is our shepherd—our PERSONAL shepherd. Think how awesome that is. In this great big, HUGE universe we are but a flyspeck and yet God, Himself, claims us as His sheep. This truly is a humbling thought.

Also, to think that Christ, God's beloved Son and the physical creator of all this creation, is my brother and loved me (individually) so much that He gave His life for me is also humbling. Isaiah 53:5,6: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we, like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." Through Christ's great gift we are given the opportunity, through repentance, to daily come back into God's presence. This sacrifice shows us of His pure, unadulterated love. We belong to Christ because He bought us with His blood and He is well within His rights to lay claim to our lives.

It is like that with the shepherd and his sheep. He is able to buy his first flock of sheep with the money he earned from his own blood, sweat and tears. Because of this, the sheep feel like a part of him.

It isn't a coincidence that God chose to call us sheep for we, as humans, have a lot in common with sheep. Our fears and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, and our perverse habits parallel each other. Yet, despite all this, the Lord chose us, bought us, calls us by name, makes us His own, and delights in caring for us. He intercedes for us continually. He is ever guiding us with His Holy Spirit and is always working on our behalf to ensure that we will benefit from His care.

When a shepherd buys a ewe, he marks it as his own by laying an ear on a block and notching it with a razor-sharp knife. Now, even from a distance, the sheep will be recognized as belonging to that particular shepherd.

In the Old Testament if a slave in a Hebrew household chose, of his own freewill, to become a member of that household, the master would place him against the doorpost and with an awl puncture a hole in his ear. From then on he was marked as belonging to that house.

What mark do we bear to show we are of Christ's flock? Luke 9:23: "And he said unto them all, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me."

We can't just verbally claim the Lord is our shepherd. We have to prove it by showing through our actions that we belong to Him. Ask yourself these six questions:

1. Do I REALLY belong to Him?
2. Do I really recognize His right to me?
3. Do I respond to His authority and acknowledge His ownership?
4. Do I find freedom and complete fulfillment in this arrangement?
5. Do I sense a purpose and deep contentment because I am under His direction?
6. Do I know rest and repose, besides a definite sense of exciting adventure, in belonging to Him?

After giving these careful thought, if you can answer “yes” to these questions; then, like David, you can truly exclaim, “The Lord IS my shepherd, and I’m thrilled to belong to Him for it is because of this that I shall flourish and thrive no matter what life may bring to me.”

“Eternally Grateful”

I SHALL NOT WANT

What a proud, positive, bold statement to make! Obviously this is the statement of a sheep utterly satisfied with its owner and perfectly content with its lot in life.

The word “want” means not lacking in proper care, management or husbandry. It also means being utterly content in the Good Shepherd’s care and consequently not craving or desiring anything more. Strangely David, at the time he made this statement, had seen poverty, hardship and anguish of spirit. Obviously this does not imply that we, as God’s sheep, will never experience hardships. It is through our trials that we are made stronger.

This also does not imply that anyone who is under the Shepherd’s care is prosperous. We are the wealthiest nation in the world. Does this mean we live closer to God than, say, our brothers in Belize or Nepal? NOOO!

I was actually walking closer to God in my impoverished time than any other time in my life. It was because I knew God was in control. My financial security had totally been taken out of my hands. Even now, being self-employed, we don’t have a weekly paycheck. There are times that we have been right on the edge of a financial cliff with toes hanging over before He snatches us back and gives us another house. He has blessed us, through our business, so that now we can assist others. God wants to bless us (read Jabez’s prayer in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10) as long as we don’t make those material things our God. I always tell clients to not borrow more than they can afford and still be able to live life and enjoy their families.

There are always those, though, who are never happy with what they have—the Jones’ always look better. Phillip Keller who wrote the book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* tells of a beautiful sheep he had who was very pleasing to the eye and very strong, but she constantly wanted what was on the other side of the fence. Very often it was dry, abused ground, but it was “something different.” It was bad enough that SHE would get out, but it got to where her lambs and other sheep escaped with her. He finally, to save his flock, had to kill her. This should be a solemn warning to us to stay on the right side of the fence because at any time we could be cut down and find ourselves face to face with our Creator. James 1:12: “Blessed is the man that resisteth temptation; for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.”

HE MAKETH ME TO LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES

The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very make-up, it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met:

1. Owing to their timidity, they refuse to lie down unless they are free of all fear.
2. Because of the social behavior within a flock, sheep will not lie down unless they are free from friction with others of their kind.
3. If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. Only when free of these pests can they relax.
4. Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. They must be free from hunger.

Just as the shepherd watches over his flock continuously and frees them from fear, tension, aggravation and hunger our Heavenly Father is always with us, no matter the time, to do this for us.

When we look for His hand taking care of us, we are free to enjoy the tranquility and serenity that comes in trusting in our Shepherd. II Timothy 1:7: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power and of love, and of a sound mind." Psalms 4:8: "I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep; for thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety."

Another thing that keeps sheep from contentment is the battle to be the top dog (or sheep in this case). We call it pecking-order mentality. Even the disciples, though, argued about who was the greatest. Luke 22:24: "There was also a strife among them, who of them should be accounted the greatest." Just as the old ewe, because of pride, tries to maintain the top position we have individuals in the Restoration that do the same thing. That's why we splinter, and then splinter some more. The only way this is going to come to an end is by allowing our Good Shepherd to be in control and take it out of man's hands.

Just as insects and parasites take away peace from the sheep, the little daily irritations rob us of our contentment. Our antidote for this is allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. When we give God these irritations, He comes to our assistance by anointing us with His Holy Spirit.

The pastures in Palestine, where David wrote this Psalm, were known to be dry and barren ground. The shepherds had to clear the ground, plant seed and water it to produce a good pasture. It took a lot of time, hard work and skill.

Christ prepared the ground for us by trying to clear the ground of our sins (the cross), planting the seed (His word), and watering it with His Holy Spirit that daily brings us contentment. Let's not settle for the inferior ground of the world; let's desire to rest in God's green pastures.

His Unspeakable Gift

HE LEADETH ME BESIDE THE STILL WATERS

The shepherd always knows where the best watering places are. Sometimes he has had to physically produce them. Sheep, like humans, are made up mostly of water. They cannot go without it. Just as

the physical body cannot go without water, the human soul has a natural need for the living water of the Spirit of God.

When sheep are thirsty, they set off to find water. If left on their own, they may find water that is not clean and become sick and sometimes die. We, as humans, can quench our thirst for spiritual life only by drawing from God's well of living water. Matthew 5:8: "And blessed are all they that do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost." John 7:37, 38: "In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." John 4:9-16: The Samaritan woman at the well.

"Drink" means to simply "take in". This implies that a person accepts and assimilates the very life of Christ to the point where it becomes a part of him. Saint Augustine of Africa summed it up when he wrote, "O God! Thou hast made us for thyself and our souls are restless, searching til they find their rest in Thee."

One of the sheep's main sources of water is the morning dew. The shepherd has to rise early so they can graze while the dew is on the ground. Just as the sheep that graze early are more content when we rise early and seek God's word, we are refreshed in mind and spirit.

Galatians 5 and Romans 8

HE RESTORETH MY SOUL

David walked close to the Lord most of his life, yet there were times when even he felt dejected and cast down. He tasted defeat and the frustration of falling into temptation. Psalm 42:11: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God."

When a sheep gets on his back and can't roll back over, it is called being "cast down." If the shepherd is not keeping a good eye out on his flock and doesn't get the sheep back on its feet, it will die. The shepherd isn't the only one looking for a cast down sheep—vultures, coyotes and other predators are, too, for they are easy prey.

Even the strongest and healthiest can become cast down. It may roll on its side to stretch or relax, and the center of gravity in its body shifts and it ends up on its back. This is a very serious problem for the shepherd. This is why when I read the story of Christ with his 99 and 1 lost sheep, I understand the love and devotion the Good Shepherd had for all of His sheep.

Mosiah 11:159-207 tells the story of the sons of Mosiah and Alma's son. Now Alma (the younger) was a wicked man who was a gifted speaker. He stole the hearts of the people from God. An angel appeared to the five of them, and in a voice like thunder that shook the earth told them that his appearance was the answer to Alma's (the father) prayer and those of his people. Alma became dumb and weak, and they took him to his father. Alma and his people prayed and fasted two days, and then Alma (the younger) received his strength back and was able to speak.

Another way a sheep becomes cast down is to look for a soft, rounded hollow in the ground to lie down. Thus it is with us when we look for the easy place or the comfortable position where there

isn't any hardship or need for endurance. When we think we have it made, we better take a good look at ourselves and see who we belong to. Sometimes God, Himself, has to take us out of our complacent life and put us into a rougher pasture for our own good.

Another reason a sheep gets cast down is it is too fat. A shepherd then has to put it on a strict dietary regimen. Thus it is with us. Sometimes when we flourish financially and in our businesses and careers, we feel we have "arrived." We get a feeling of self-assurance and well-being. Often when we're most sure of ourselves, we are the most prone to fall flat. Proverbs 16: 18, 19: "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly than to divide the spoil with the proud."

THY ROD AND THY STAFF THEY COMFORT ME

A shepherd spends a lot of time making his rod. It has to be an extension of his right arm—it is the only thing he has to protect himself and his sheep. He has to be skilled at throwing it. Isn't it interesting that God had Moses use his rod to perform the miracles against Pharaoh and to part the Red Sea?

The rod is God's word in His scriptures. They are the extensions of His mind and will for us. God's word gives us peace and tranquility in this chaotic world.

The shepherd also uses his rod for discipline. If he sees a sheep wandering off, he hurls it through the air and sends the sheep scurrying back to the flock.

He also uses his rod to stop a sheep so he can examine it carefully for any disease. Just as God does in Psalms 139:23,24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." We shouldn't shirk from God's examination. When He shows us the things we need to change (i.e., pride, lack of discipline, etc.), we need to be grateful and set about correcting these things.

The staff also is shaped especially for the shepherd. It is used to direct the sheep by pressing it against their sides. Also, if a shepherd has one that is special to him, he will walk along beside it with his staff touching its side, kind of like us holding hands. The staff is likened to God's "Holy Spirit" or "The Comforter." It is a reminder that if we allow God, He will walk beside us, hand in hand, throughout our lives.

Only the Christian who learns to totally trust God in all things is able to inspire the weaker ones. Too many of us are shaken up and frightened by the storms of life. We claim to have confidence in Christ; but when the path we're on looks gloomy, we go into a deep slump of despair.

All of us are going to have trials—the key to our success or failure is how we react to them. James 1:2-4: "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into many afflictions; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." Do we curse God or lift our voices in praise knowing that He will deliver us? Are we going to fight against His staff when He tries to rescue us, or give ourselves over to it?

THOU PREPAREST A TABLE BEFORE ME IN THE PRESENCE OF MINE ENEMIES

David referred to the table as the mesa, which is the summer range for grazing. A good shepherd goes ahead of the flock and prepares the mesa by setting up camp, putting out mineral blocks, getting rid of poisonous plants, etc.

As with sheep, we feel we have to try everything that is set before us. If you're a chocolaholic (like me), you don't eat a whole box of Girl Scout cookies. You know that's going to make you sick. Satan knows just the right things to weaken you (your Achilles heel). God is our protector like the shepherd is to his sheep. When the sheep are on the tableland, their enemies can see them easily from the rocks above. This is why the ones who wander off from the shepherd are easy prey for their enemies. Just as the sheep need to stay close to the shepherd, we need to also by getting into His word and conversing with Him daily.

It is through Christ's sacrifice (and our repentance) that we are able to graze contentedly on that tableland. Let's not let this sacrifice to have been for naught. Instead, let's strive to walk in the ways of holiness, of selflessness, or serene contentment in God's care, aware of His presence and enjoying the intimacy of His companionship.

THOU ANOINTEST MY HEAD WITH OIL

When sheep are in a perfect area, such as the high meadow, there is still a "fly in the ointment." Literally, flies can drive sheep to the point sometimes of even killing themselves. They deposit their eggs into the sheep's nostrils and work their way in, and they get severe inflammations. For relief they end up hitting their heads on rocks and trees. Because they know what these flies can do, they become frantic and panic when they are around. All of this excitement can have a devastating effect on the flock. To ward off this problem the shepherd puts an ointment on their heads to protect them from these flies. This creates peace and comfort amongst the sheep.

Have you ever had some little nagging thing that drives you to distraction? It eats at you and eats at you until you find yourself banging your head in frustration. In this case we need to be anointed with God's Spirit. Sometimes it takes more than one anointing to do it.

It is God's daily application of His Spirit, which produces joy, contentment, love, patience, gentleness and peace.

Sheep also get scabs. Primarily they rubbing their heads together in a form of affection pass these from body to body. When the scriptures talk about the sacrificial lamb being without blemish, the uppermost thing in the writer's mind was that the lamb be free of scabs.

The scabs in our lives are our sins. Because of our sinful natures, we shouldn't rub heads with those who are in willful rebellion against God.

When we allow God's Spirit to permeate our very existence, we will be at peace with the world around us. III Nephi 5:61-63: "Verily, verily I say unto you, I give unto you to be the light of this people. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Behold, do men light a candle and put it under a bushel? Nay, but on a candlestick, and it giveth light to all that are in the house; therefore let our

light so shine before this people, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

Another anointing of the head that the shepherd does is when it is mating season, and the rams are battling each other for the ewes’ attention. They actually maim or kill each other. So, the shepherd smears grease all over their heads and noses so they slide off each other. Among God’s people there is also a lot of head butting. If we don’t see eye to eye with another, we “butt heads” in order to be the “top sheep.” Remember how Christ’s own disciples argued amongst themselves at the last supper who the greatest was? Luke 22:24: “There was also a strife among them who of them should be accounted the greatest.” You didn’t see any of them washing Christ’s feet, did you?

To deal with these things God gives us His Holy Spirit. When we allow His Spirit to work in us, we enjoy the attributes of peace, long suffering, joy and generosity. We also realize how ridiculous all of our petty jealousies and rivalries are. As God’s sheep, we should be known as the most contented on earth.

SURELY GOODNESS AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE

All through this study we’ve seen the attentive care the shepherd shows his sheep, and through his skill and loving management the sheep know for a surety that theirs is a privileged position. No matter what happens, he is always sure that goodness and mercy will be his.

How many of us feel this way? We mentally know that God is always there for us; and when everything is running smoothly in our lives, we feel that goodness and mercy. But, what about when we lose our job, or get sick, or have a wayward child or lose a loved one? Do we feel God close to us then? These are the times that test our confidence in God’s care.

Elizabeth Elliot, a missionary who lost her husband when he was killed by the natives he was trying to minister to, didn’t stop believing in God’s mercy and tender care. Instead of taking her small daughter and returning home to safety and comfort, she chose to stay and continue her husband’s work. She literally allowed God to hold her in the palm of His hands, resting assured that He would take care of her and her daughter. Wow! What faith and trust! It’s almost unheard of in today’s society. We, as Americans, are such independent people that it is hard for us to let go and let God take care of us. There is so much that we can do for ourselves that we don’t rely on God the way people in third world countries do. They have to rely on Him for even their most basic needs. Do you believe that it’s going to take something devastating for us to get to this point? I know that God doesn’t want us to come to Him through destruction and desolation, but because we love Him and desire to walk with Him. When we do this, mercy and goodness will be ours; and, hopefully, we can pass that on to others.

What will our legacy be? Will it be one of sadness or gladness? If we ask ourselves these simple questions, what will our answers be?

Do I leave behind peace in lives, or turmoil?
Do I leave behind forgiveness, or bitterness?
Do I leave behind contentment, or conflict?
Do I leave behind flowers of joy, or frustration?

Do I leave behind love, or rancor?

Some people leave such a sorry mess behind them wherever they go that they prefer to cover their tracks and never go back.

Jesus' life on earth was summed up in five simple words. "He went about doing good." He always showed mercy, even to the sinners. John 8:1-11 tells about the woman caught in adultery.

The only real, practical measure of my appreciation for the goodness and mercy of God to me is the extent to which I am, in turn, prepared to show goodness and mercy to others. God loves us unconditionally, but it pleases Him tremendously when we reciprocate that love and draw close to Him.

AND I WILL DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD FOREVER

A good shepherd's flock is so content by the care given them that they can never imagine being in anyone else's care. When they return to the ranch, after being out in the pasture, they tell their less fortunate neighbors how great it is to be in their shepherd's care and what a great year they've had.

Do we, as Christians, do this? Are we proud to belong to Christ? Do we share all the amazing things He's done for us, both large and small? Do we let our light shine to those in darkness?

Mr. Keller tells how the rancher next to him didn't take good care of his sheep, and they were sickly and weak. They would wait until the tide was down and cross over into his lush, green pastures. They would eat so much that their digestive systems couldn't handle it. One time he found three sheep like this. He loaded them up and took them back to their owner. The owner drew out a knife and, without any show of emotion, slit their throats. These sheep had not come into the shepherd's pasture by the right gate. John 10:1-13

We rub shoulders daily with people on the other side of the fence. Some live in total darkness. Do we share our many testimonies of God's love with them? Do we share how Christ loves them so much that He gave His life for them?

Do we truly understand the significance of having a master as great as our Heavenly Father? What are we willing to do to show how much we appreciate His loving care? John 13:13-17: "Ye call me Master and Lord; and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."

THE 23RD PSALM-EXPLAINED

This is an eye opener! Probably we never thought about it nor looked at this Psalm in this way even though we say it over and over again.

The Lord is my Shepherd—That's Relationship!
I shall not want—That's Supply!
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures—That's Rest!
He leadeth me beside the still waters—That's Refreshment!
He restoreth my soul—That's Healing!
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness—That's Guidance!
For His namesake—That's Purpose!
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—That's Testing!
I will fear no evil—That's Protection!
For Thou art with me—That's Faithfulness!
Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me—That's Discipline!
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies—That's Hope!
Thou anointest my head with oil—That's consecration!
My cup runneth over—That's Abundance!
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life—That's Blessing!
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord—That's Security!
Forever—That's Eternity!