

## Jehovah Raah

Sheep need a shepherd. That's pretty obvious if you've ever been around domesticated sheep! They need protection and care pretty much 24/7. Left on their own, they have tendencies of getting lost and coming to rather gruesome ends. Psalm 23 was quickly understood in David's day, written when farmers and shepherds largely populated the work force. But today it's a different story. Most of us are far removed from the daily realities of the Psalmist's chosen metaphor: we are like sheep and God is like a shepherd. Even for those of us who read Psalm 23 as a source of comfort, our identification with sheep is hard to grasp. However, the similarities continue to ring true. Like Israel we have an inclination to want to go our own way, thinking that we can live independent of any Divine care and guidance. We have been influenced by a culture that is rabidly independent, resisting all attempts of outside guidance and care, choosing instead to depend on inner strength and self-direction. Not too far from our evangelical lips is that heretical quasi-religious American phrase, "God helps those who help themselves." Underneath this lie covered with a skin of truth is the reality. That reality some anonymous soul penned as the Antipsalm 23:

I'm on my own.

No one looks out for me or protects me.

I'm always restless. I'm easily frustrated and often disappointed.

It's a jungle – I feel overwhelmed.

It's a desert – I'm thirsty.

My soul feels broken, twisted, and stuck. I can't fix myself.

I stumble down some dark paths.

Still, I insist: I want to do what I want, when I want, how I want.

But life's confusing. Why don't things ever really work out?

I'm haunted by emptiness and futility – shadows of death.

I fear the big hurt and final loss.

Death is waiting for me at the end of every road,

but I'd rather not think about that.

I spend my life protecting myself. Bad things can happen.

I find no lasting comfort.

I'm alone... facing everything that could hurt me.

Are my friends really friends?

Other people use me for their own ends.

I can't really trust anyone. No one has my back.

No one is really for me – except me.

And I'm so much all about ME, sometimes it's sickening.

I belong to no one except myself.

My cup is never quite full enough. I'm left empty.

Disappointment follows me all the days of my life.

Will I just be obliterated into nothingness?

Will I be alone forever, homeless, free-falling into void?

Sartre said, "Hell is other people."

I have to add, "Hell is also myself."  
It's a living death, and then I die.

The author of Psalm 23 begs to differ. He has obviously faced some dark valleys of death, would be friends that turned on him, and the overwhelming sense of danger in this world. Yet, he sings of the trust that he has placed in his Shepherd God, while at the same time, confessing that he is in need of provision, direction, protection and guidance.

King David not only knew the old stories but lived in them. What Abraham, Moses, and Gideon experienced was true of his faith experience as well. His God had proved faithful. Indeed Yahweh was his Elohim, El Elyon, Adonai, El Roi, El Shaddai, Jehovah Jira, Jehovah Ropha, Jehovah Macceddeshem, Jehovah Tsidkenu, Jehovah Shalom, and Jehovah Raah. Being a former shepherd, he knew all too well the tendencies of sheep and was quick to identify and acknowledge his need for a Shepherd.

The pressing question today is not, "Is there a God?" but, "What kind of God is there?" Few seriously champion atheism because of its obvious intellectual vulnerability, but many have searching questions about what God is like. Is God cruel or is He good? In short can God be trusted? Our lives can only flourish in the fertile soil of trust, and it is the Old Testament's revelation of the faithfulness and goodness of God that opens the door to that trust.

From the beginning of creation to its continued promise of the Savior the Old Testament reveals that we are dependent upon God for even our sense of worth as individuals. Our uniqueness and dignity are rooted in our creation in the image of God. Our value is not tied to wealth, status, accomplishments, or position. It is a gift. Obviously, this wonderful truth flies in the face of the modern tendency to define people by what they produce or what they have.

The Old Testament also gives witness to the terrible reality of the fall of humankind revealing that it was fundamentally a denial of our dependence upon God. Adam and Eve took to themselves what God had forbidden. They said, in effect, "We will provide for ourselves." They mistrusted the goodness of God by believing the serpent's lie that God was holding back from them something good. And when they did, they realized that they were naked. The nakedness in question was not so much a lack of clothes as it was the awful vulnerability which they assumed in declaring their sovereignty. Independence always comes at a high price, and especially so when it involves a rejection of the gracious provision of God.

My Dad turns 88 years old this month. He has just witnessed his 90 year old wife wither away to nothing in body and mind. His eye sight is failing; his lower back is painful; he suffers from hearing loss; he's lost six inches in height; he gets around slowly with a cane; and his dependence on the Shepherd of his soul is increasing daily! Every morning he

gets out bed with the awareness of his utter dependence on his Shepherd to give him strength for another day. Old age can open our eyes to the reality of our true vulnerability in this world and our need of God's daily provision and care. But why wait until then? Youth and good health should not delay us from running to Jehovah Raah, for they too are gifts of our Shepherd.

My Dad reminds me of a story I heard a few years ago:

There is a story of a great orator traveling through America quoting various pieces of famous literature. With brilliant inflection and polished voice he quoted Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and other great writers. At the end of each program, he would ask if anyone had any particular poem or scripture they would like quoted.

One night a lady asked him to quote the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The great orator eloquently began: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." When he had finished the crowd clapped madly and demanded an encore. Again in swelling tones the orator spoke out the words of the beloved Psalm.

Once again the crowd clapped enthusiastically. This time, however, the orator said, "Tonight my pastor is with me and although he has been retired for years, I wish him to come and quote the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalms.

In the back an aged man rose heavily and walked down the aisle, leaning over his cane. His hair was white, and his face creased with the cares of many years. Helped to the platform, he stood behind the podium and in a barely audible voice began, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." When he was finished the crowd did not applaud. Rather there was a reverent hush in the auditorium. Both women and men wept openly having been moved deeply by the majestic words of the great Psalm.

After an uncomfortable silence, the great orator rose and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, do you know why it was when I quoted the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm you applauded but when he quoted it you prayed? The reason is because I know the Psalm but he knows the Shepherd."

How about you? Do you know the Shepherd or the Psalm? Has your reflection on the names of God challenged your wayward independence? Can you admit to your sheep like qualities? Do you find yourself closed armed to the provider and guardian of your soul? Our dependence on God is deeply rooted in the Old Testament revelation. As you have read the revelation are you allowing the revelation to read you? The Holy Spirit waits to do His transformative work, but first you must receive the revelation of God almighty in repentance and humility. Lord Jesus, Lover and Shepherd of our souls, have mercy on us all.

### **Reflection/Assignment**

1. Read Psalm 23. What are your initial thoughts? David says that Yahweh is his shepherd. Can you say that? Why? Why not?

2. The psalm is divided into three scenes. The first scene is in verses 1-4. How does God shepherd David? What is his response? What is your response?

3. Scene two is in verse 5. How is God portrayed? What does David experience? Is this your experience? If not, ask the Lord to reveal the barriers to experiencing Him in this manner.

4. Scene three is in verse 6. How is God portrayed here? What is your response to the eternal perspective of God's shepherding care?

5. Consider the following scriptures. These are familiar verses to most of us. What do you observe about our Shepherd? What do you observe about sheep? What is your response?

Psalms 78:52-55

Luke 15:1-7

John 10:1-18

1 Peter 2:20-25

6. Why would the righteous run into Jehovah Raah? Why is there safety there? Warning: in order to heed Proverbs 18:10 and run into God's name, remember that most often we would have to run from some false god! The question arises, why were we not in the strong tower of His identity in the first place? One reason is because we have unhealthy dependant attachments to things and/or people. In order, therefore, to run to God we would have to turn away from that unhealthy dependence on something or someone else. What unhealthy attachments keep you from running to your Shepherd? Ask God to search your heart and deliver you from any false gods. While on earth Jesus was utterly dependant on the Father and acknowledged that He was the source of all good things. We observe Jesus setting the example. Oh, Lord, help us by the power of the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus.