Handling the problem of identity – Psalm 23

1. Introduction

Some people have a **very low self-image**. They feel complete failures. Everything they try to do seems to fail. So they build up a picture in their minds that it is impossible for them to succeed. If you suffer from this there will be a knock on effect. Your marriage will suffer, your children will suffer, your team will suffer and the work of God will suffer!

Some people have a **very inflated self-image**. This leaves the rest of us grasping with disbelief. In the UK we had a boxer who called himself Prince Naseem. He enjoyed making incredible boasts about himself. He was going to be the world featherweight boxing champion – that is until he was knocked out in a few bouts. It is very damaging to think and talk about one's personal invincibility.

Both a low self-image and an inflated self-image are very damaging in the work of God. Most of the problems of culture shock come from loss of identity and failure to let God's evaluation of us to be our evaluation.

The Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote:

"Oh wad some power the giftee gie us
To see ourselves as 'ithers see us!"

That is healthy talk or at least better talk. One of the best antidotes to a false self-image is to assess as accurately as possible what other people are saying about you! But in reality this isn't much help.

The best antidote is to see yourself as God sees you! The only adequate self-image comes from the acceptance of God's evaluation of our lives. But strangely, God seems to go with **both** extremes. His assessment of us is very negative, very low; but **under certain conditions,** God's assessment of us is that we are "invincible sheep" – "more than conquerors" – the sort of claim that would have Prince Naseem gasping with awe.

2. *"The Lord is my Shepherd"* – the reality that changes fearful stupid sheep into wolf-chasing sheep

In times like this there is a demand for people who have strong minds, great hearts, true faith and steady hands. Psalm 23 is the testimony of a sheep who was in great need, but who was found by a shepherd. This sheep is thrilled with his shepherd and thoroughly enjoys being shepherded.

The first step to a healthy self-image – "I am a sheep"

We are like stupid sheep. We must see ourselves in this way! We read in Isaiah 53:6, ***"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way."***

I am no expert on sheep and I don't want to be, but in my early years in the Arab World I had some unpleasant experimental knowledge of Arab World sheep! It is hard to find animals more stupid and waywardly obstinate! All sheep have a remarkable aptitude for getting lost and getting into trouble.

Picture a scene in the English Lake District. The sheep are in a nice green pasture safe behind stone walls. But one wall has a small gap in it that a sheep can slip through onto a road. One revolutionary sheep goes through. Quickly all the rest follow. They desert the lovely grass for the road. They block the road. Soon there are dozens of sheep in the road. Cars and trucks are honking. There are screeching tyres, bleating sheep and the quiet countryside is turned into bedlam!

A sensible sheep would survey the scene, stay in the field and keep eating the grass in safety. Does this happen? No! The sheep will mill around in panic causing chaos until the sheepdog arrives and then they scatter to the four winds. We are like sheep. We too have a great tendency to abandon what we know is good for us believing there is something better just beyond our reach. A German philosopher called this tendency "the herd instinct". This flatters us! Cows are intelligent! This is flock folly! We follow the trends in fashion, in the markets and even in methods for the sort of things we do. But this is flock folly! We are "faddists" in so many areas.

There is within us an inbred propensity to go wrong – a failure to admit to this must inevitably lead to an inaccurate self-image and consequently a distorted idea of our identity.

So the **sheep syndrome** leads to failure, rebellion and sin. It is depressing, but this is our identity if we are to be realistic and accurate about ourselves.

The second step to having a healthy, productive self-image

In Ps. 23 we see a description of a sheep lacking nothing – a sheep that isn't afraid of anything – a sheep that daily has a "cup that runs over". This is an exuberant, aggressive sheep!

The Lord Jesus said to His disciples, ***"Behold, I send you forth as sheep among wolves"***. (Mt. 10:16) They were not sent forth to be eaten or to be frightened but rather as wolf-frightening sheep – as wise, invincible, wolf-chasing sheep! Wolves are known to be clever and cunning, but here are sheep that appear to be able to outsmart the smartest wolf and to intimidate the fiercest.

But the Psalmist says to us, 'You don't have the privilege of deciding either/or because you are both'.

"The Lord is my Shepherd." What is the difference between the above two images of a sheep? There are shepherdless sheep and sheep with the Lord as their Shepherd and they are completely different from each other!

This is not only the first statement of this song; it is the all-inclusive statement. It includes all that follows. It interprets the glory and the suffering of this amazing fact. The Lord Jesus is the **Good Shepherd** who gave His life for us sheep. He knows His sheep. He calls them by name and He leads them (Jn. 10:11). Jesus is the ***"Chief Shepherd"*** (1 Pet. 5:4). Heb. 13:20 calls Him the ***"Great Shepherd of the sheep"***.

What about being a wolf-chasing sheep?

The Lord Jesus said, ***"I send you out as sheep among wolves"***. (Lk. 10:3) To do what? Chase them? Frighten them? Somehow this doesn't seem quite right! I wonder if you have seen an amazing film with Kevin Costner called **Dances with Wolves**? It is from a book written by Michael Blake. It is a fascinating view of a lone expatriate American (John Dumbar) slowly coming to terms with an American Indian tribe. At first he saw them as a hostile culture speaking an alien language, but by the end he came to love and trust this tribe and "bonded" into it.

And that is it! **We are to dance with wolves!** Michael Griffiths wrote a manual for workers going into another culture called **"Lambs dancing with wolves"**. It is an outstanding book. We always remain sheep, but we have a lifestyle that is very unusual and it is entirely due to the impact of the Shepherd that we can treat wolves in this way!

Who is this Shepherd? The Lord (YHWH) – the eternal all-powerful God – the Creator who is ruling over the entire universe. But He is also the direct, personal, immediate Shepherd of my life.

Psalm 78:52 speaks of the Lord who, ***"Led forth His people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness as a flock".***

This great and glorious God takes responsibility to act as my Shepherd – me, a little insignificant sheep! This does wonders for my self-image. I am a stupid sheep, but this amazing God agrees to Shepherd me!

"He tends His flock like a shepherd;
He gathers the lambs in His arms,
And carries them close to His heart.
He gently leads those that have young." (Is. 40:11)

"Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel,
You who lead Joseph like a flock;
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim;
Shine forth …. Awaken Your might;
come and save us. Restore us, O God;
Make Your face shine upon us
that we may be saved." (Ps. 80:1-3)

So God has agreed to shepherd me! Note the little word '**is**'. The Lord **is** my Shepherd – not was, not will be, there are no ifs or buts. The Lord **is** my Shepherd and this reality changes everything. It changes me from being terrified into being completely confident – a 'dancer amongst wolves'. This doesn't just make us adequate! It makes us, ***"More than conquerors through Him who loves us"***.

Nine characteristics of a sheep that dances with wolves

1. The sheep *"lie down in green pastures"* – contentment

Have you ever had an uncontrollable urge to make a sheep lie down? If so, you will know that it is almost impossible! Try to do it sometime. You can't make a hungry sheep lie down! But if you fill its stomach full of nice green grass, it will gladly lie down contentedly ruminating on how good life is!

So sheep that lie down in green pastures are contented sheep! They feel nourished, full, complete and content. We live in a very discontented age. Great pressure is being put on people to prove themselves – to be acceptable – to have the right status symbols. I have teenage grandchildren and some of them find life can be extremely tough if they don't conform to their teenage culture and have all the right things. But when you have the right things, preserving them and keeping them up-to-date takes all your time, energy and money.

So many people have fears, phobias and ulcers. But it is bliss being content! It is wonderful not having the pressure to prove anything. It is great to look at the situation you are in and say, *"World, you are looking at a sheep, but a sheep who is content to be all and only what My Shepherd wants me to be. I have no desire to fulfil your expectations of me. I have no desire to pile up all the things you say I need for my well-being. My Shepherd has made me content!"*

Is this true of your life? Are you content – content with your image of yourself?

2. The sheep is *"beside still waters"* – refreshed

"Times of refreshing may come from the Lord." (Acts 3:19)

As you know, rivers and streams are rare in the Middle East. When it rains there torrents of water are soon rushing down into the dry wadis. When this happens sheep in the wadi are likely to be washed away and killed.

"He leads me beside still waters." Good shepherds don't rely on streams and rivers. Where are the still waters? They may be wells with the water poured into troughs. Commonly they are small dams the shepherd has made that collect water and it is to these cisterns (quiet waters) that the shepherd leads his sheep, not to rest but to quench their thirst. So David is not referring to water rushing down a wadi, but to quiet refreshing places that the Lord has made for us.

Many of our "stormy waters" are self-made and they will never quench our thirst! Often in our mad desire to be something or do something – to be successful – we get ourselves into all kinds of choppy rushing waters. As a result we get very frustrated because we are slowly dying (spiritually) of thirst. We can see the water but we can't drink.

Allow the Shepherd to lead you to the refreshing places of still waters and know His peace. **He will do this if you allow Him to.**

But not all storms are self-made. Many situations arise for which we are not responsible but they hit us with the force of a hurricane or tornado. The principle is the same! Even in these storms, the Lord is committed to leading us to peaceful waters right in the midst of the storm.

The shepherd digs the wells or makes the cisterns so he knows where they are! In all circumstances our thirst is quenched and we experience, ***"Times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord"***.

3. *"He restores my soul"*

In Hebrew, 'soul' means the life of oneself. In the shepherd's country there are private fields, fields with crops growing, vineyards etc. Sheep are only allowed to graze on "common land". If a sheep stray is into someone's private property and is caught there, then it is forfeit to the owner of the private land. The end of that sheep is most likely to be "in the stew"!

Essentially, ***"He restores my soul"*** means that He brings me back and rescues me and my life from forbidden and fatal places where I might get "into the stew". He restores me to safety when I have been wandering. Charles Wesley wrote:

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be.
Let Thy grace Lord, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it.
Prone to leave the God I love.
Take my heart Lord, take and seal it.
Seal it in Thy courts above.

I find this very helpful! It really gladdens my heart. There are times when I feel "the roof has caved in" – times when I almost "come apart at the seams" – times when I'm tired and discouraged, weary and worn and sad. Why? **I have wandered!** This is not the victorious life promised to me.

At times like this, let the Shepherd "restore your soul" – bring you back under His guidance – back to victory, to effectiveness, to contentment and to refreshment.

4. *"He leads me in paths of righteousness"* – correct decision-making

The fear of making a wrong move paralyses many people and becomes a major source of stress. At times people have, in effect, asked me to make up their minds for them. They are so anxious about making the right decision and are also so sure of their ability to mess things up that they try and put the responsibility on the shoulders of others.

It is very important and wise to get advice and counsel, but ultimately we need to trust that He will ***"Lead me in the paths of righteousness*** (or the right paths) ***for His name's sake."***

The Lord is concerned that His sheep should go the right way **for His sake** – out of loyalty to His character and His great promises. He is much more concerned about the way I go then I am! So He is prepared to make the way clear for the unsure – those of us who are willing to accept His direction. This takes a great deal of stress out of living!

If you roam over the country south and east of Bethlehem you find it is rough country. Choose the wrong path and it leads you to a precipice. Choose another path and you may be able to climb up but not get down again. Remember you are sheep and sheep don't abseil! But this Good Shepherd doesn't tell you the way. **He leads you**. He is just ahead of you, clearing the path. He is with you.

There are been many occasions in my life when I had no idea what I was getting into, but always there was a quiet confidence that I was heading in the right direction – I was being led. Does this destroy the need for insight, counsel, research and decisiveness? Not at all. We need all these and then we must **act** in dependence on God. So check out your options, evaluate your decisions, get what advice you can, explore the consequences and then go ahead, in dependence on the "Best Shepherd". He can and will stop you if He wishes to.

5. *"The valley of the shadow"* (v. 4) – the places that generate fear

Some people fear death and many others fear the process of dying. Some fear neither. Then there are many other fears that shadow people's lives. But these "sheep" have no fears. They aren't afraid. They are fearless. Of course there is a certain amount of trepidation when faced with the unknown. None of us has had the experience of dying or being dead, so a certain amount of apprehension is understandable and permissible, but stark fear? No! Why? Because ***"You are with me"***.

The Lord Jesus is with us, even in our dying and death. He is the only one who has been through it personally – our risen Lord Jesus. Our last enemy is death. (1 Cor. 15:26) The good news is that the One who is the Resurrection and the Life and who holds the keys of death and hades is with me!

In the Arab World, valleys often have names designed to warn people – the Valley of the Robbers, the Ravine of the Ravens etc. Death is a shadow on our lives. There are many other griefs that can cut us to the heart, such as:

- the death of a spouse or the death of a child
- the destruction of a work of God by others
- the death of faith or vision in colleagues and friends

But in this Psalm the key phrase is, ***"For You are with me"***. My Shepherd is with me and it is this that produces fearlessness in "sheep". A sheep trusts in the shepherd.

This is the sort of "sheep" that can work in the trouble spots of the world with equanimity. This is the sort of sheep that can march into a pack of wolves without fear of harm. He/she goes to places others shun because of fear. This sheep lives there in the place of fear with quiet composure. Why? Because he/she believes that the Lord of the Valley is his/her Shepherd! If the Shepherd decides it is time for him to go into that valley of fear and even to die, he can go home with joy – dead on time. So fearlessness is a characteristic of shepherded sheep.

6. *"My rod and My staff"*

The Shepherd's equipment is rather unsophisticated – a rod and staff. One is for protection and the other for correction. My security doesn't lie in my environment – whether in lush green pastures or quiet still waters or going along the right paths. My security lies in my Shepherd's competence! When sheep are afraid, they cuddle up near the shepherd. Sheep need comfort. They are naturally fearful and the shepherd is their comforter!

The rod (perhaps a more accurate translation would be closer to a club!)
If a marauding animal should come along, a blow from that club would cause it to leave very quickly.

The staff – typically with a crook at one end
Again it is used to protect the sheep. When wandering sheep fall into a small ravine, the staff pulls them back to safety. When sheep need a poke, they get it from the staff.

Now all this whacking and walloping – all this poking and prodding doesn't sound very appealing! But it is appealing to sheep! It is a great joy and a relief to know that you are protected and that you will always be protected. So we are protected from dangers that leap on us unawares and we are corrected so we don't get into unnecessary trouble. It is only a really stupid sheep that can't stand that correction. Such sheep are usually hard to live with!

7. *"A table in the presence of my enemies"* – imperturbability

Here I think you see the perfection of the skill and the heroism of the shepherd!

Part of the task of a shepherd in the Arab World is to go ahead of the sheep and find a safe feeding place for the sheep. This requires much skill and much courage. Consider the following:

- There are often poisonous gourds on the ground. A sheep that eats them will die.
- There are holes where poisonous snakes live. The snake will bite the nose of the sheep. These snakes need to be killed or driven away. The shepherd usually does this by lighting a fire, heating a pan of animal fat and then pouring the liquid down the hole. As it solidifies it plugs the hole.
- There may be holes or caves hosting wild animals – jackals, wolves or hyenas. The shepherd needs bravery and skill to close up these dens or to kill these wild predators.

All these actions on the part of the shepherd demonstrate his brave devotion to the sheep.

So we have this great picture of sheep seated at a great sumptuous sheep feast. It is in the open-air. Notice the lavishness of the feast – a table laden with all the sheep could ever wish to eat!

From afar the wolves, jackals and other predators may growl and yap. They may lick their chops, but they are helpless and afraid! The sheep are completely unperturbed – "They don't bother me I am enjoying my feast".

This is a picture of keeping one's cool in the heat. It is a delightful experience to be with people who keep their cool. So many people blow their fuses easily when they are afraid. They yell and wave their fists in rage or they run with fear. Imperturbability is a joy both to practice and to behold.

In a crisis, when the heat is on, tell your enemies (impatience, fear, arrogance, selfishness etc.) to watch because you are resting in the Lord. You are experiencing the banquet of God's care and God's provision. You are feasting while the enemy is fuming!

8. *"My cup runs over"*

Here is a beautiful picture of what happens at the end of the day! We have seen what has been happening all day – the care of the shepherd and the needs of the sheep. Now comes the last scene of the day.

The shepherd stands at the entrance of the sheepfold and the sheep pass into the fold one by one. With his staff he inspects the sheep one by one as they go into the fold. He has a horn of oil and he anoints a knee that has been bruised on a rock or a scratch caused by a thorn. If a sheep comes who is neither bruised nor hurt but is simply worn out and exhausted the shepherd will wash its face with refreshing olive oil and will take a small basin and fill it with water for the weary sheep to drink.

My Shepherd's care for the wounded, the worn out and the weary is also great! He ***"anoints my head with oil and my cup runs over."*** We do get hurt and torn. We don't have to display our injuries to everyone. We don't have to hide in a corner and lick our wounds in secret. Our Shepherd has the oil of anointing and healing to pour out in overflowing measure.

So when you have been head-butted or had your fragile ego shattered or perhaps your reputation shredded, go to your Shepherd who will pour in the oil of anointing. He knows, He cares and He understands perfectly. He is waiting for you after you have lived through a very stressful day. Your cup will run over.

9. *"Goodness and mercy"* – what God has begun He will continue!

The day has ended, the sheep are in the fold resting contentedly under the starry sky. The sheep say to themselves, "As this day has been, so all my days will be …. ***'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.'*** My Shepherd will guard me from harm and look after me and prepare my future for me.

The song dies away and the grateful sheep God has watched and tended, fed and rescued, breathes a vow before this day of roaming is forgotten in sleep, ***"I will"*** (not 'I hope', for it is a definite, settled purpose – a holy vow) – ***"I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever"***.

So the sheep are at rest – safe in the good shepherd's fold. But for us, it is not his fold but his house. John 15 tells us that the Lord Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us – not a fold but a house!

There are two things we must learn in life – how to live and how to die. The sheep in Psalm 23 had learned both. When I am alive – all the days of my life – I will experience the goodness and mercy of God. And when death comes along, I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Summary

The secret of life and death is to find your true identity! So see yourself as a sheep! Freely admit your 'sheepish' capacity for going wrong. It's not difficult to admit that you can't handle wolves. Gladly acknowledge your absolute dependence on the Shepherd to lead you, protect you, provide for you and correct you.

So as we look out at life/death with such contentment and equanimity, we can honestly say that we don't lack anything at all. He creates and guards our peace. If we wander, we are not abandoned. In the darkest hour, He is with us. **He upholds us – He fights for us – He delivers us in conflict – He entertains in the midst of the battle and He receives us into His house for ever**. What an amazing, wonderful Shepherd!

Paraphrases of Psalm 23

A "Workers" Psalm

The Lord is my Master, I shall not fear.
He calls me to dwell in a far country.
He leads me across great waters.
He rejoices my heart.
He lights me by the star of holiness for His own Name's sake.
Yes, though I pass through sorrow and the shadow of death,
I will flee no trouble for You are with me.
Your Cross and Your Crown, they beckon me.
You prepare a table before me as a refuge in my loneliness.
You refresh my soul with joy; my lamp burns brightly.
Surely Your strength and solace shall comfort me in the way
that I take and I will soar to the throne of my God forever.

The Antithesis

The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest.
It makes me lie down only when exhausted.
It leads me to deep depression.
It hounds my soul.
It leaves me in circles of frenzy the for activity's sake.
Even though I run frantically from task to task, I will
never get it all done.
For my "ideal" is with me.
Deadlines and my need for approval, they drive me.
They demand performance from me, beyond the limits
of my schedule.
They anoint my head with migraines.
My in-basket overflows.
Surely fatigue and time pressure shall follow me all the
days of my life
And I will dwell in the bonds of frustration for ever.

For Busy People

The Lord is my pace-setter.
I shall not rush.
He makes me to stop and rest for quiet intervals.
He provides me with images of stillness
Which restore my serenity.
He leads me in ways of efficiency
Through calmness of mind.
And His guidance is peace.

Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day,
I will not fret, for His presence is here.
His timelessness - His all importance
will keep me in balance.

He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity
By anointing my mind with His oils of tranquillity.
My cup of joyous energy overflows
Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours.
For I shall walk in the peace of my Lord and dwell in His house forever.

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An Antithesis

The TV is my shepherd.
My spiritual growth shall want.
It makes me sit down and do nothing for its name's sake,
Because it requires all of my spare time.
It keeps me from doing my duty as a believer
Because it presents so many good shows that I must see.
It restores my knowledge of things of the world
And keeps me from the study of God's Word.
It leads me in the paths of failing to attend worship services
And doing nothing for the Kingdom of God.
Yes, though I live to be a hundred, I shall keep on viewing
the TV as long as it works
For it is my closest companion.
Its sounds and its picture, they comfort me.
It presents entertainment before me and keeps me from
doing important things with my family.
It fills my head with ideas which differ from those set forth
in the Word of God.
Surely, no good thing will come of my life
Because my TV offers me no good time to do the will of God.
Thus I will dwell crownless in the house of the Lord forever.