

Frequently when we wish to discuss something complex the model we choose turns out to govern the entire discussion. For example, some think of the church more or less as an enterprise. They bring with them the models of business. They think in terms of boards, committees and chairpersons. It becomes very difficult for them to think of the church in any other guise. Others think of the church in terms of familial relationships, brother this and sister that, relationships and meetings. Still others think of the church as the pillar and ground of the truth. In this case the fellowship aspects of the church may get lost in the shuffle. The church is the organisation that proclaims the truth. Again the model controls the entire discussion.

How then shall we talk about God? For all of our talk about God resorts in one degree or another to models. God is the great King. Inevitably we bring to the consideration what we know of kingship from this world. He is the Judge, he is the sovereign, he is the Lord, he is the Rock, he is the Deliverer. But each model casts up an entire range of associations. God is our Father. What then do we conjure up when we say that? 'As a father pities his children so the Lord pities those who fear him.' Or we may remember that in the Ancient Near East the father was also an authority figure. But there are no notions of God as Creator bound up with the image of God as Father. That is one of the reasons, then, why the Bible uses many different models. We need all of them to be brought together. When we think of God biblically we move from one image to another so that all of what God has revealed of himself comes across to us.

### Intimate metaphor

In Psalm 23 David reaches for the most comprehensive and intimate metaphor for God that he can think of. Up to this point in the book of Psalms God is most insistently portrayed as king, as deliverer, as our shield, our rock (a symbol of steadfastness and security) our shield. But David himself was a shepherd for a long time. As he writes he knows the hours and hard work involved in being a shepherd. He has experienced the kind of bond that is formed between shepherd and sheep. He knows the shepherd's life is not a summer's day idyll: a shepherd's life was hard work. The shepherd was the flock's guide, protector, thinker, organiser, disciplinarian, physician. He was the one who sheared the sheep, who got rid of the nose fly, who rotated his fields, planned ahead for pasture land, and ensured adequate water. He could be bound up with the sheep day and night because there was inadequate help, especially in wilder country where savage animals might ravage the flock. David turns these things over in his mind. He has been a shepherd; now he

Don Carson



## IN A SHEEP'S SHOES!

The first part of an exposition by Don Carson of Psalm 23

writes 'The Lord is my shepherd'.

In this psalm, David thinks about God as if, he, David were a sheep. In other words, this is a sheep's eye view of God. David has been a shepherd for so long that he understands sheep. So he puts himself in the mind of the sheep, as it were. He pictures God from a sheep's perspective and teases the metaphor out a little in order to explain what he has experienced of God. This is the Psalm of the sheep — but these sheep are God's people, and this shepherd is none other than God himself.

What then does the sheep of the Lord's flock experience, that makes them address God in these terms?

### (1) Contentment

First: they experience contentment.

Like so many Psalms this one opens with the Lord. 'The Lord is my shepherd.' When David uses the term he enjoys a rich background of antecedent revelation. He knows that this Lord is the Creator. He knows this Lord is the covenant God, the God who revealed himself to his people at Sinai; he knows that this Lord is the Judge. But what he reflects on and confesses here is more intimate: 'The Lord is my shepherd'. It is often argued that though 'the Lord' opens the Psalm the most sublime word in the first line of the psalm is 'my'. The Lord is *my* Shepherd.

The intimacy is very much like that to which Jesus refers in John 10: 'My sheep hear my voice and they know me.' Shepherds tell us that when sheep are a little skittish and harried the very presence of the shepherd is enough to calm them down. They recognise his voice; they smell him; they know his movements. He is familiar and reassuring; he enters the field and they settle down. Now David lifts his eyes upwards and he says: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.' At the level of the metaphor, of course, that means that the sheep shall not lack shade or forage or shelter in vile weather. They shall not lack the kind of trimming and maintenance and care that sheep need. But how does this apply to us? It means that the Lord's sheep can say with complete contentment, 'I know who my shepherd is, and therefore I am content. The Lord is my shepherd, so of course, I shall not be in want. He is the kind of shepherd who so cares for his sheep that it cannot possibly be imagined that I shall lack anything.' 'No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly'.

### A rare jewel

In other words this is a statement of what has been called *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. Sheep do not lie down when they are hungry or harried. When they are harried they are skittish and likely to run. A starting hare can set them off. When they are hungry they stand on their feet and put their heads down and eat. But not these sheep. *He makes me lie down in green pastures*. These sheep have their stomachs full; they lie there, quietly munching, already replete.

Young people often tell us what field of work they are planning to enter. Over the years I have asked some of them one question: 'You are going into business? Why?'

'Well, I think I am pretty good at it.'

'Is that a good reason?'

'Well I'd like to make some money.'

Then a shadow of guilt passes over their face. 'So I can give a lot to missionaries.'

'Is that important? What are you after? What are you pursuing?' I am not for a moment suggesting that everyone should be pursuing vocational ministry. God forbid. But I am saying that many of our motivations in the most mundane of decisions are corrupted by a kind of vague sense of unease that drives us onward. It can be less a mark of a desire to please the Lord than it is a mark of our own unease.

The French have a lovely expression. *Il est bien dans son peau*. (He is comfortable in his skin.) It sounds slightly corny in English. But there is a sense in which Christians should be comfortable in their skin, as it were — not because they are so pleased with themselves but because they know the Lord and they are content. This believer is not content because of what he possesses, but because of whom he knows. That is the connection David draws: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.' All of David's contentment rests in knowing the shepherd.

It has to be said that there are many of



The grass is greener in the fields of the Lord. [Photo: Derek Hopgood]

us who are theologically sound but who do not find great contentment in the Lord. I suspect it is very often because we have not taken time to think on his ways, to discipline ourselves in prayer, to meditate on his truth and to find that by His Spirit he makes us rejoice in him. That is why the Scriptures say 'Taste and see that the Lord is good.' The goodness of God is not simply a credal point. It is an invitation to know him and be satisfied. That is why Paul can pray in Ephesians 3 that believers to whom he is writing 'may have power together with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.' He want them to know 'this love that surpasses knowledge.' The love of the shepherd for the sheep is profoundly satisfying. To be loved by the Almighty himself and to know it in one's experience is wonderful beyond words. The truth of the matter is that God would not choose a flock unless he could nurture and sustain it and cherish it, and therefore my knowledge of him, my knowledge that he is my Shepherd must be the basis of my entire contentment.

### (2) Assurance

Secondly, these sheep enjoy assurance.

*He restores my soul*. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. What does this mean in the context of an extended sheep/shepherd metaphor? Do sheep now have souls? Or has David abandoned his metaphor?

The expression 'my soul' often (but not always) in Scripture simply refers to my life or myself. God restores my very

life. The background here is probably, so shepherds tell us, the experience of a sheep being 'cast'. The idiom varies from country to country but in Canada they speak of sheep being 'cast'. A 'cast' sheep is a sorry sight. A sheep may lie over on its back, an accident caused perhaps by a little depression in the ground, and then discovers that it cannot get its feet back down on the ground. So it begins to flay its legs as it tries to get up on all fours. Unable to stand up, it starts bleating rather piteously. As its legs churn, gases begin to collect in its rumen. These gases guarantee that the centre of gravity becomes lower and lower making it harder and harder for this wretched sheep to stand up. If it is there long enough the circulation to the legs is cut off. In hot weather the gases can build up so quickly that a cast sheep can die within a few hours. In cold weather a sheep can lie there rather piteously for several days before dying. If your sheep farm lies in the Rockies, there are dangers from vultures, mountain lions, and other beasts of prey. That is one of the reasons why in that kind of environment, as also in ancient Israel, a shepherd was constantly counting his sheep to make sure they were all there. If he was one short, probably it was off somewhere behind a hill or in the next valley, 'cast', and therefore helpless but still salvageable provided someone got

to it in time.

Something similar happens to the Lord's sheep. There are times when, although we belong to the Lord's flock, we truly are going nowhere in our spiritual life. We too are, as it were, cast, snared, captured, distracted by the love of money, by pride of position, by love of reputation, by prayerlessness, by lust, by unconfessed sin, a prey to every vulture and wild pack of dogs and ready to die. The psalmist says: 'He restores my soul.' This is the kind of image Jesus has in mind in Luke 15.1-8. There among the Lord's flock is one sinner who repents. The shepherd has found this sheep, this sheep which at first is so enfeebled that it cannot walk. It has been cast for some time; the circulation has been cut off from its limbs for too long. The shepherd hoists the sheep up on his shoulder and carries it, rubbing its limbs.

He restores my soul. This verb 'restores' is frequently used in Scripture in both an objective sense and a subjective sense. I suspect both are meant here. The objective sense is found in Psalm 60.1: 'You have rejected us, O God, and burst forth upon us; you have been angry — now restore us!' What the psalmist is asking for is an objective restoration to heal an objective alienation, that is, an alienation that has an external, objective reality. By contrast, subjective restoration is exemplified in Proverbs 35.13: 'Like the coolness of snow at harvest time is a trustworthy messenger to those who send him; he refreshes (or 'restores'; it is the same verb) the spirit of his masters.'

The psalmist says: 'He restores my soul'. Objectively, this means that the

psalmist's life is saved, restored. He is not abandoned when he is 'cast'. But there are probably subjective overtones as well; he is refreshed, restored in spirit.

Not only so, but 'he guides me in paths of righteousness'. If we stay within the extended sheep metaphor that could be equally rendered: 'He guides me in right paths', i.e. 'paths of rightness'. The right path for the sheep is frequently a path that moves it on to avoid overgrazing. Sheep crop the grass all the way down to the roots and can destroy an entire field. Sheep have to be moved on. There are 'right paths' for sheep. They may not always be easy paths; sometimes they are rocky paths, over rough terrain — to get to the next valley, perhaps. But if they are this shepherd's paths they are the 'right paths'. Outside the sheep/shepherd metaphor, there are 'paths of righteousness'. The right paths for the Lord's people are inevitably 'paths of righteousness' whether or not they are comfortable or easy, for the shepherd knows best, and can be trusted.

### God's reputation

All this the Shepherd undertakes 'for his own name's sake'. Now it is true that he loves the sheep, but this shepherd also has a reputation to maintain. He does not want to hear someone condescendingly remark: 'What a stupid shepherd! He does not know how to look after his sheep!' Is not this reminiscent of the kind of appeal that Moses makes when he addresses God at the incident of the golden calf? Why should you destroy this people O Lord? Won't the Egyptians say Oh yes, he was strong enough to take this people out of Egypt but he wasn't strong enough to preserve them in the wilderness?

There is a sense in which God's strongest motivation is the integrity of His own name. He must act in such a way that his own holiness and his own reputation are preserved. And so we can read these words in one of the famous new covenant passages (Ezekiel 36.22ff). 'Therefore say to the house of Israel, This is what the Sovereign Lord says. It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. And then he goes on to talk about the new covenant, under which he will sprinkle their hearts to cleanse them and pour out his Spirit to renew them and generate a new heart.

### His holy name

Then he adds: 'I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign Lord.' And again: 'I had concern for my holy name which the house of Israel profaned.'

Frequently this is the Hebrew way of establishing a strong contrast: the contrast becomes an antithesis, i.e. not this but that. That is what is at stake here. It is not that God does not love Israel. Many passages insist that he does. It is not that God does not love the church today. Many passages insist that he does. But the final reason why he wants to preserve us is not that we are such a worthy crew but because God is jealous for his own name. And that, for the thinking Christian, is a wonderful assurance. For if at the end of the day whether or not God restores my soul, if at the end of the day whether or not he will lead me in paths of righteousness, turns on how well I do this week, I am in a desperate position. But this text says: 'He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.' So the psalmist experiences not only contentment with God but also deep assurance.

*Professor Don Carson, the main speaker at this year's Word Alive, is Professor of New Testament at Trinity Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, USA.*