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 as a building or a place where things happen. Others think of the church 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 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 organization 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 concept of God all we know of kingship from this world. He is the Judge, he is the sovereign, he is the Rock, he is the Deliverer. But each model casts up an entire range of associations. God is our Father. Then what 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 different models. We need all of them, in order to bring God to us.

When we think of God biblically we move from one image to another. We see 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). The shepherd is a model for the love of God. The shepherd is a model for the love of God. David says that God, just as a shepherd is a model for the love of God, is the Lord of his life. David thinks about God as if he, David, were a sheep. In other words, David puts on the shepherd’s point of view. This shepherd is more than a model. God has been a shepherd for so long that he understands sheep. So he can speak with a shepherd’s perspective. David’s model is in this case a metaphor. In order to explain what he has experienced of God. This is the Psalm of Shepherd — but these sheep are God’s people, and this sheep is none other than himself.

What then do the sheep of the Shepherd’s flock experience, that makes them address God in these terms?

**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 flock have a lovely expression. *It 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 why Paul can pray in Ephesians 3 that believers to whom he is writing ‘may have power through all the spirit of understanding to whom he is writing’.

**(1) Contentment**

First: they experience contentment. Like so many Psalms this one opens with the Lord as 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 really likes is the Lord to confess in the very beginning: ‘The Lord is my shepherd’. It has to be said that there are many of 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 sound of his Passion, to study the Bible. What is the Lord? The Lord is my shepherd. The love of the shepherd for the sheep is profoundly satisfying. To be loved by the Lord is the ultimate reward. It is the summation of all 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 the Lord, my knowledge that he is my Shepherd must be the basis of my entire contentment.

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**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 do are hungry, they stand on their feet and put their heads down and eat. But not these sheep. He makes them *lie down in green pastures*. These sheep have their stomachs full; they lie there, quietly munching, already replete. Young people often tell me what field of work they are planning to do some years hence. 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 could make some money.’ Then a shadow of guilt passes over their face. ‘So I can give a lot to missions.

**(2) Assurance**

Secondly, there is contentment. *He restores my soul*. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. That does mean in the context of an extended sheep/shepherd metaphor? Do sheep now have souls? Is David abandoning his metaphor? The expression ‘my soul’ often (but not always) in Scripture simply refers to my life or my self. 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 flap 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 paid to ensure that sheep made sure they were all there. If he was one short, probably it was off killing herds to protect his flock from predators. That is what has been called the word ‘cast’. The word ‘cast’ 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 sound of his Passion, to study the Bible. What is the Lord? The Lord is my shepherd. The love of the shepherd for the sheep is profoundly satisfying. To be loved by the Lord is the ultimate reward. It is the summation of all 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 the Lord, my knowledge that he is my Shepherd must be the basis of my entire contentment.

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**Reformation Magazine**

- April 1994

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

writes ‘The Lord is my shepherd’. Paul, thinking about God as if he, David, were a sheep. In other words, David puts on the shepherd’s point of view. This shepherd is more than a model. God has been a shepherd for so long that he understands sheep. So he can speak with a shepherd’s perspective. In order to explain what he has experienced of God. This is the Psalm of Shepherd — but these sheep are God’s people, and this sheep is none other than himself.

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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 right­ness’. The right paths for the Lord’s people are inevitably ‘paths of right­ness’ 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, 0 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 insists that he does. It is not that God does not love Israel. Many passages insists 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.

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