

## KEEPING WATCH OVER THE FLOCK

The young Jewish shepherd David wrote the 23rd Psalm nearly 3,000 years ago while he tended his father's flock. A real-life 20th-century shepherd tells what the words mean to him.

by Phillip Keller

Illustrated by Lucian Lupinski

The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very makeup it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met.

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

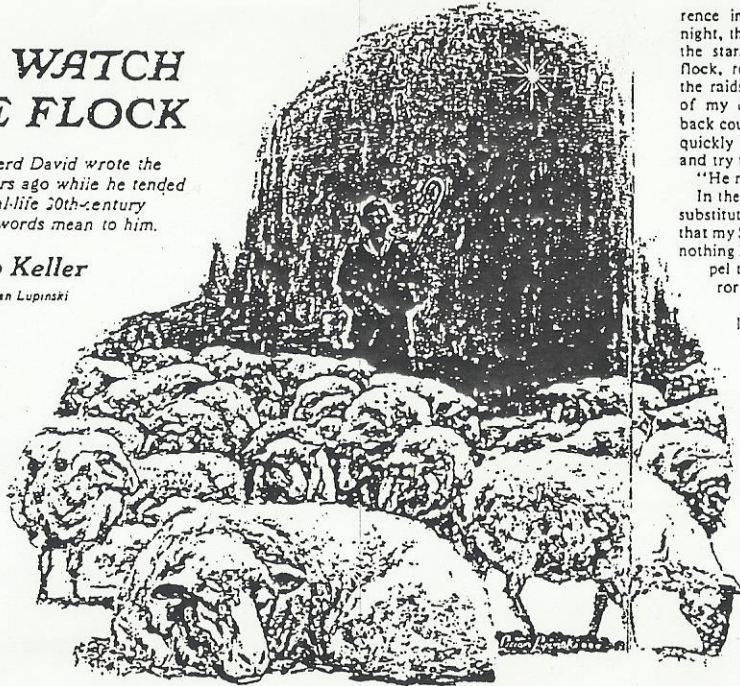
It is significant that, to be at rest, there must be a definite sense of freedom from fear, tension, aggravations and hunger. The unique aspect of the picture is that it is only the sheepman himself who can provide release from these anxieties. It all depends upon the diligence of the owner whether or not his flock is free of disturbing influences.

When we examine each of these four factors that affect sheep so severely, we will understand why the part the owner plays in their management is so tremendously important. It is actually he who makes it possible for them to lie down, to rest, to relax, to be content and quiet and flourishing.

A flock that is restless, discontented, always agitated and disturbed never does well.

And the same is true of people.

*Editor's Note:* This excerpt is from the book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* by Phillip Keller, who is a shepherd in real life. It is reprinted by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.



It is not generally known that sheep are so timid and easily panicked that even a stray jackrabbit suddenly bounding from behind a bush can stampede a whole flock. When one startled sheep runs in fright, a dozen others will bolt with it in blind fear, not waiting to see what frightened them.

As long as there is even the slightest suspicion of danger from dogs, coyotes, cougars, bears or other enemies, the sheep stand up ready to flee for their lives. They have little or no means of self-defense. They are helpless, timid, feeble creatures whose only recourse is to run.

When I invited friends to visit us, I always made it clear their dogs were to be left at home. I also had to drive off or shoot other stray dogs that came to molest or disturb the sheep. Two dogs have been known to kill as many as 292 sheep in a single night of unbridled slaughter.

Ewes, heavy in lamb, when chased

by dogs or other predators will slip their unborn lambs and lose them in abortions. A shepherd's loss from such forays can be appalling. One morning, I found nine of my choicest ewes, all soon to lamb, lying dead where a cougar had harried the flock during the night.

It was a terrible shock to a young man like myself just new to the business. From then on, I slept with a .303 rifle and flashlight by my bed. At the least sound of the flock being disturbed, I would leap from bed and, calling my faithful collie, dash out into the night, rifle in hand, ready to protect my sheep.

In the course of time, I came to realize that nothing so quieted and reassured the sheep as to see me in the field. The presence of their master and owner and protector put them at ease as nothing else could do, and this applied day and night.

There was one summer when sheep rustling was a common occur-

rence in our district. Night after night, the dog and I were out under the stars, keeping watch over the flock, ready to defend them from the raids of any rustlers. The news of my diligence spread along our back country roads, and the rustlers quickly decided to leave us alone and try their tactics elsewhere.

"He maketh me to lie down."  
In the Christian's life, there is no substitute for the keen awareness that my Shepherd is nearby. There is nothing like Christ's presence to dispel the fear, the panic, the terror of the unknown.

We live a most uncertain life. Any hour can bring disaster, danger and distress from unknown quarters.

No one can tell what a day will produce in new trouble. We live either in a sense of anxiety, fear and foreboding or in a sense of quiet rest.

Generally, it is the "unknown," the "unexpected," that produces the greatest panic. It is in the grip of fear that most of us are unable to cope with the cruel circumstances and harsh complexities of life. We feel they are foes that endanger our tranquility.

Often, our first impulse is simply to get up and run from them.

Then, in the midst of our misfortunes, suddenly comes the awareness that Christ, the Good Shepherd, is there. It makes all the difference. His presence throws a different light on the whole scene. Suddenly things are not half so black nor nearly so terrifying. The outlook changes, and there is hope. I find myself delivered from fear. Rest returns, and I can relax.

The second source of fear from which the sheepman delivers his sheep is that of tension, rivalry and cruel competition within the flock.

In every animal society, there is established an order of dominance or status within the group. In a penful of chickens, it is referred to as the "pecking order." With cattle, it is called the "homing order." Among sheep, we speak of the "butting order."

Generally, an arrogant, cunning and domineering old ewe will be

boss of any bunch of sheep. She maintains her position of prestige by butting and driving other ewes or lambs away from the best grazing or favorite bedgrounds. Succeeding her in precise order, the other sheep all establish and maintain their exact position in the flock by using the same tactics of butting and thrusting at those below and around them.

Because of this rivalry, tension and competition for status and self-assertion, there is friction in a flock. The sheep cannot lie down and rest in contentment. They must stand up and defend their rights and contest the challenge of the intruder.

Hundreds and hundreds of times, I have watched an austere old ewe walk up to a younger one that might have been feeding contentedly or resting quietly in some sheltered spot. She would arch her neck, tilt her head, dilate her eyes and approach the other with a stiff-legged gait. All of this was saying in unmistakable terms, "Move over! Out of my way! Give ground or else!" And if the other ewe did not immediately leap to her feet in self-defense, she would be butted unmercifully. Or if she did rise to accept the challenge, one or two strong thrusts would soon send her scurrying for safety.

This continuous conflict and jealousy within the flock can be a most detrimental thing. The sheep become edgy, tense, discontented and restless. They lose weight and become irritable.

But one point that always interested me very much was that whenever I came into view and my presence attracted their attention, the sheep forgot their foolish rivalries and stopped their fighting. The shepherd's presence made all the difference in their behavior.

When my eyes are on my Master, they are not on those around me. This is the place of peace.

As is the case with freedom from fear of predators or friction within the flock, the freedom of fear from the torment of parasites and insects is essential to the contentment of sheep. Especially in the summer, sheep can be driven to absolute distraction by nasal flies, bot flies, warble flies and ticks. When tormented by these pests, it is literally impossible for them to lie down and rest. Instead they are up and on their feet, stamping their legs, shaking their heads, ready to rush off in-

to the bush for relief from the pests. The sheepman must be amongst his charges daily, keeping a close watch on their behavior. As soon as there is the least evidence that they are being disturbed, he must take steps to provide them with relief. Always uppermost in his mind is the aim of keeping his flock quiet, contented and at peace.

Finally, to produce the conditions necessary for a sheep to lie down, there must be freedom from the fear of hunger. This is clearly implied in the statement, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."

It is not generally recognized that many of the great sheep countries of the world are dry, semiarid areas. Most breeds of sheep flourish best in this terrain. They are susceptible to fewer hazards of health or parasites where the climate is dry. But in those same regions, it is neither natural nor common to find green pastures. Palestine, where David kept his father's flocks, is a dry, brown, sun-baked wasteland.

Green pastures did not just happen by chance. Green pastures were the product of tremendous labor, time and skill in land use. Green pastures were the result of clearing rough, rocky land; of tearing out brush and roots and stumps; of deep plowing and careful soil preparation; of seeding and planting special grains and legumes; of irrigating with water and husbanding with care the crops of forage that would feed the flocks.

All of this represented tremendous toil and skill and time for the careful shepherd. If his sheep were to enjoy green pastures amid the brown, barren hills, it meant he had a tremendous job to do.

But green pastures are essential to success with sheep. When lambs are maturing and the ewes need green, succulent feed for a heavy milk flow, there is no substitute for good pasturage. No sight so satisfies the sheep owner as to see his flock well and quietly fed on rich green forage, able to lie down to rest.

Because of our own perverseness, we often prefer to feed on the barren ground of the world around us. I used to marvel how some of my sheep actually chose inferior forage at times. But the Good Shepherd has supplied green pastures for those who care to move in onto them and there find peace and plenty. X