

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is probably one of the most well-known chapters in the entire Bible. A great deal has been said about it. This psalm can be found everywhere – on pictures, and on pillows, and in funeral homes. It is probably the only chapter of the Bible that is commonly known by heart. People know this psalm, they understand it, and they have heard it taught countless times.

This makes my job very difficult. What is there to say that hasn't already been said? If given a choice I would rather teach a psalm that is not well-known or understood. Since there are so many psalms it makes more sense to teach one that is *not* known as opposed to one that people already know extremely well. But since this is the psalm that has been chosen for this Sunday, it is what we will be discussing.

The opening verse of Psalm 23 is very famous:

Psalm 23:1: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

One fact about this verse that tends to get glossed over is that if the Lord is David's shepherd, that can only mean that David is calling himself a sheep. Given that David was the king of Israel, that is a remarkably humble statement to make! There aren't many kings who will willingly lower themselves and identify as a rather foolish and weak animal. Kings love to glorify themselves and boast about how wonderful and impressive they are. Nebuchadnezzar is a great example of this – when he looked over the city of Babylon he boasted in his own greatness:

Daniel 4:30: “The king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?”

That is what kings do – they boast about themselves. But David does not do that. David instead calls himself a *sheep*. Now, sheep are not particularly great animals. They need a shepherd to lead them into good pastures, or else they will starve (or poison themselves by eating something they shouldn't). They need a shepherd to lead them to still waters, or else they will be swept away and drown. Sheep have no ability to protect themselves from wolves or other predators. If a bear comes to tear them to pieces they are pretty helpless. Without a shepherd to watch over them they are as good as dead.

That's a remarkable thing for David to say about himself, isn't it? David, remember, was king over a whole nation. He had vast wealth, too. Take a look for yourself at the donation that David made toward the construction of the First Temple:

1 Chronicles 22:14: “Now, behold, in my trouble I have prepared for the house of the Lord an hundred thousand talents of gold, and a thousand thousand talents of silver; and of brass and iron without weight; for it is in abundance: timber also and stone have I prepared; and thou mayest add thereto.”

How much is 100,000 talents of gold? Well, a talent is 75 pounds. This means that David donated *7.5 million pounds of gold* to the temple. At today's prices that would be worth around *\$11 billion dollars*. That would be an unbelievable donation even by modern standards! No one gives that much money to anyone. But David freely gave a vast, staggering fortune to the temple. In order to do

that, of course, he had to have that much gold in the first place.

David controlled an entire country and he had armies at his disposal. Some of his soldiers were supermen. 2 Samuel 23:8-12 tells us that three of David's mighty men each single-handedly defeated an entire army, because God was with them:

2 Samuel 23:8: “These be the names of the mighty men whom David had: The Tachmonite that sat in the seat, chief among the captains; the same was Adino the Eznite: he lift up his spear against eight hundred, whom he slew at one time.

9 And after him was Eleazar the son of Dodo the Ahohite, one of the three mighty men with David, when they defied the Philistines that were there gathered together to battle, and the men of Israel were gone away:

10 He arose, and smote the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand clave unto the sword: and the Lord wrought a great victory that day; and the people returned after him only to spoil.

11 And after him was Shammah the son of Agee the Hararite. And the Philistines were gathered together into a troop, where was a piece of ground full of lentiles: and the people fled from the Philistines.

12 But he stood in the midst of the ground, and defended it, and slew the Philistines: and the Lord wrought a great victory.”

The Lord used each of these individuals to crush *entire armies!* As you can see, David was incredibly powerful and unbelievably wealthy. He could easily have boasted in his greatness or his power, but he didn't. He could have talked about the great things he accomplished and his amazing victories over the Philistines, but he didn't do that either. Instead he did the one thing that kings never do: he called himself *a sheep*.

It is incredibly hard for a rich man to humble himself and see his need for God. After all, if you're rich then what need do you have for someone else to save you? You've got it made! You have everything you could ever want and you can make any problem just go away. The poor see their desperate need for a savior, but the rich so easily see themselves as gods. That is why Jesus said this:

Matthew 19:23: “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.

24 And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”

A rich man's great wealth is actually an *obstacle* to salvation. It tempts him to think that he is much greater than he really is. But David never trusted in his wealth or his strength. He instead saw himself as a sheep who was in need of a shepherd.

David was right – the Lord is our shepherd. Jesus said this Himself:

John 10:11: “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.”

Jesus is our shepherd. He is the one who makes us lie down in green pastures and who leads us to still waters. He is the one who restores our soul and who protects us from our enemies. He is the one who makes our cup run over even in the midst of terrible times. Jesus does all of these things because

He cares for us. He loves us. In fact, He loves us so much that He actually *died* for His sheep.

Stop and think about that for a minute! You would have to care a *lot* about sheep in order to die for them. We are talking about *sheep*, after all. There is no shortage of sheep in the world. Why would anyone ever sacrifice their own life in order to keep a few sheep from getting eaten by bears? It's not like sheep are exceptionally valuable or wise. You simply *cannot* argue that the lives of a few disposable sheep are worth more than the life of their shepherd.

Likewise, it is simply beyond question that the life of God is worth infinitely more than the life of any of His creations. God, after all, is infinitely holy and just and perfect. He is an eternal being who lives from everlasting and to everlasting. We, on the other hand, are *guilty*. We deserve to be condemned. We are not innocent. No one is:

Isaiah 53:6: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Since God's life is worth infinitely more than all of our lives put together, it makes sense that *we* should be the ones to die. Since God is innocent and we are guilty, it makes sense that *we* should be punished. But that is not what God did. Jesus is the good shepherd who did indeed lay down His life for His sheep. He didn't do it because we deserved it, for we did *not* deserve it. He didn't do it because we were valuable, for our value is nothing compared to the life of the eternal God. He did it because He loved us:

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

We were saved by the great love of God. While we were yet sinners Christ died for us. He took upon Himself the punishment that we deserved. Since God has punished Christ on our behalf, we may go free. All those who repent of their sins and believe on Jesus will be saved. They will not face the wrath of God; instead they will be forgiven.

That is what the good shepherd does – He gives His life for the sheep. But not all shepherds are good. Jesus warned of another type of shepherd who cared only for himself:

John 10:12: "But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep.

13 The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep."

When the good shepherd sees trouble coming he stands his ground and defends his flock. He refuses to budge. He cares so much about the lives of his sheep that he is willing to risk his own life in order to protect them. He will stand up to tremendous danger in order to safeguard his flock. The hireling, though, is different. All the hireling cares about is his next paycheck. He's not going to take any risks on behalf of his sheep. As verse 13 says, he doesn't actually care about the sheep – he only cares about himself. He will take care of the sheep as long as it doesn't cost him anything, but if a predator comes and danger arises he is going to step back and let the sheep be destroyed.

This is still true today. There are some pastors who are good shepherds, and there are other pastors who are hirelings – and there is a vast difference between the two. The hirelings take the easy route. They know their sheep need green pastures and still waters, but they aren't going to risk their careers to provide it. They're more interested in keeping the peace and preserving their own jobs than

teaching the truth. They aren't going to make waves or do anything that might get them fired. Standing up to evil is dangerous, so it isn't done. Teaching the hard truths is dangerous, so it isn't done. Leading the sheep to places they *need* to go but don't *want* to go is too risky, so it isn't done.

But Jesus did all of these things because He was the good shepherd. He taught hard truths that people did not want to hear:

John 6:60: “Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?”

61 When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you?”

Jesus taught hard doctrines because they needed to be taught. Sheep don't always like the things that are good for them, but the good shepherd cares so much about his sheep that he gives them what they *need*, not what they want. Jesus did this even though there were consequences:

John 6:66: “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.”

Incidentally, isn't it amazing that John 6:66 (666) says that some people left Jesus and chose wickedness instead? That is what happens sometimes when the truth – the whole truth – is proclaimed. When Jesus taught the people things that they desperately needed to hear, they chose to reject Him and leave. But that did not stop the good shepherd. Jesus led them to green pastures and still waters; they simply refused to partake.

There are many hirelings in the world today. The world is full of people who care more about their jobs than the health of their sheep. Jesus was willing to sacrifice *His own life* for His sheep. He didn't hold back on His message in order to maximize the size of His audience; instead He fearlessly taught the whole counsel of God no matter how many people it offended. How many pastors today are willing to put their future in jeopardy in order to tell the sheep what they need to hear? How many are simply hirelings?

Jesus was the good shepherd – but He is not the only shepherd. You see, He came unto His own and His own received Him not. When the people of Israel rejected Him, Jesus told them that one day someone else would come that they *would* accept:

John 5:43: “I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive.”

Jesus came to save His people from their sins – but Israel wasn't interested in that kind of a savior. They wanted a military hero who would save them from their enemies and restore the kingdom to them. The Bible tells us that one day a very different man will come and offer Israel peace. We find him in the book of Zechariah:

Zechariah 11:15: “And the Lord said unto me, Take unto thee yet the instruments of a foolish shepherd.

16 For, lo, I will raise up a shepherd in the land, which shall not visit those that be cut off, neither shall seek the young one, nor heal that that is broken, nor feed that that standeth still: but he shall eat the flesh of the fat, and tear their claws in pieces.”

17 Woe to the idol shepherd that leaveth the flock! the sword shall be upon his arm, and upon his right eye: his arm shall be clean dried up, and his right eye shall be utterly darkened."

This is a very specific passage that is talking about a very specific person. Since Israel rejected the good shepherd God will one day raise up an evil shepherd. Jesus cared for the poor, healed the sick, and fed the hungry – and Israel rejected Him. So God is going to send them a shepherd who will care *nothing* for the poor or the sick. Instead of feeding the hungry he will tear them to pieces. Verse 17 goes on to say that he will have a deadly wound that was healed, which brings to mind another passage of Scripture:

Revelation 13:3: "And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast.
4 And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?"

I think the wicked shepherd is the antichrist. You see, Israel is still looking for peace. They have been beset by war and problems since the day they became a nation again and they desperately want to put an end to the endless war that they have been fighting. Because of this they are going to make a covenant – but this is going to be a covenant with death:

Isaiah 28:14: "Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem.
15 Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves:"

This passage is clearly talking about Israel, for it speaks of those who are ruling the people who live in Jerusalem. Israel refused to make a covenant with Jesus, but they will make one with the antichrist. This covenant will not be forced upon them, for verse 15 says that they are *in agreement* with the other party of this treaty. But this covenant will not be made with someone who has their best interests at heart. This covenant is not being made with God; instead it will be made with death. It will not be made with Heaven; instead it will be made with Hell. It will be made on a basis of lies and falsehood. Israel is going to agree to it because they think that it will bring peace – but God is not impressed. Their covenant with the antichrist is not going to start an era of safety and security. Instead it will begin the time of great tribulation:

Daniel 9:27: "And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate."

The evil shepherd is going to confirm a covenant with Israel that is supposed to last for seven years. Israel thinks that this covenant will bring peace, but instead it will begin the tribulation. When

this evil shepherd goes into the temple and declares himself to be God, Israel will finally realize that they had been tricked – but by then it will be too late. They will already be halfway through the tribulation, and will be facing even worse times than what had already taken place.

Israel is going to make a treaty with the devil. They will try to find peace, but God will bring them war instead:

Isaiah 28:17: “Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place.

18 And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.”

Israel choose the evil shepherd over the good shepherd and it will cost them many lives. Instead of finding peace they will find destruction. Instead of escaping they will be caught.

Many churches today make a similar mistake. Although they have not signed a treaty with the devil, as Israel will one day do, they *have* chosen hirelings over true shepherds. The New Testament warns us against doing this:

2 Timothy 4:2: “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine.

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

4 And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”

A good shepherd teaches the truth when it is in season *and when it is out of season*. He doesn't care if the sheep *want* to hear it because he knows that they *need* to hear it. The hireling, though, only cares about his job. He is only going to teach what the sheep will accept because he knows he lives in a time when the sheep will not endure sound doctrine. Jesus was the good shepherd who always taught the truth no matter how many or how few sheep wanted it. He commands us to follow His example and reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all longsuffering. He commands us to teach all doctrine and leave nothing unsaid.

Do you remember what Psalm 23 says? Let's take another look:

Psalm 23:2: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.”

Jesus is the good shepherd who will lead us into green pastures and still waters. He will guide us in the paths of righteousness. The question is this: *is that what we actually want?* Do we want green pastures, or do we want messages that make us feel good? Do we want still waters, or would we prefer a hireling who won't upset us with truths that we don't want to hear? Do we want the paths of righteousness, or have we rejected that and instead chosen the pleasures of sin? What is it that we *really* want?

Which shepherd do we choose – the good shepherd, who tells us things we do not want to hear and urges us to walk in a path that is not easy or comfortable, or the hireling? Would we rather make a covenant with the good shepherd who died for His sheep, or with the evil shepherd who only cares for himself? What choice are we going to make? Will we endure sound doctrine or will we reject it?

Do we want Jesus or do we want the antichrist? It is either going to be one or the other.