

Psalm 23

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

This makes my job difficult. What is there to say that hasn't already been said? If given a choice I'd rather teach something that isn't widely understood. Since there are so many psalms it makes more sense to teach one that's *not* known instead of one that people already know extremely well. But since this is the psalm that was chosen for today, this is what we'll 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's easy to miss is that if the Lord is David's shepherd then that means David is calling himself a sheep! Since David was the king of Israel that's a remarkably humble statement to make. There aren't many kings who will 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's what kings do: they boast about themselves. But David doesn't do that. Instead he calls himself a *sheep*. Now, sheep aren't particularly great animals. They need a shepherd to lead them into good pastures or else they'll starve (or poison themselves by eating something they shouldn't). They need a shepherd to lead them to still waters or else they'll 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 then they're pretty helpless. Without a shepherd to watch over them they're as good as dead.

That's a remarkable thing for David to say about himself, isn't it? David was king over a whole nation, and on top of that he had vast wealth. Take a look at the donation that he 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 weighs 75 pounds. That means David donated *7.5 million pounds of gold* to the temple. At \$2000 an ounce that would be worth around *\$240 billion dollars*. That's an astonishing donation even by modern standards! David freely gave a vast fortune to the temple – and in order to do that he had to have that much gold in the first place.

David controlled an entire country and had armies at his disposal. Some of his soldiers did superhuman things. 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 23:8-12: “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. 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: 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. 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. 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 defeat *entire armies!* As you can see, David was incredibly powerful and unbelievably wealthy. He could 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 something kings rarely do: he called himself *a sheep*.

It's 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! Rich people sometimes believe that they can make any problem go away. The poor see their desperate need for a savior, but it's easy for the rich to see themselves as gods. That's why Jesus said this:

Matthew 19:23-24: “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. 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 wealth is actually an *obstacle* to salvation. It tempts him to think that he's greater than he really is. But David never trusted in his wealth or strength. Instead he saw himself as a sheep who was in need of a shepherd.

David was right – the Lord is our shepherd. The Lord Jesus Christ taught the same thing:

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

Jesus is our shepherd! He's the one who makes us lie down in green pastures and lead us to still waters. He's the one who restores our soul and protects us from our enemies. He makes our cup run over even in the midst of terrible times. Jesus does all 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're talking about *sheep*, after all! There's no shortage of sheep in the world. Why would anyone sacrifice their own life 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's simply beyond question that the life of God is worth infinitely more than the life of any of His creatures. God is infinitely holy and just and perfect. He is an eternal being who lives from everlasting and to everlasting. However, we are *guilty*. All of us deserve to be condemned for our terrible acts of wickedness:

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, *we* should be punished. But that's 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, because we did *not* deserve it. He didn't do it because we were valuable, because our value is nothing compared to the life of the eternal God. Instead 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 we deserved. Since God has punished Christ for the terrible things that we did, we may go free. All those who repent of their sins and believe on Jesus will be saved. They won't face the wrath of God. Instead they'll be forgiven.

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

John 10:12-13: "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. 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 flee. He cares so much about the lives of his sheep that he's willing to risk his own life to protect them. He will stand up to tremendous danger to safeguard his flock. However, the hireling is different. The only thing 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 at all. 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's going to flee and let the sheep be destroyed.

This is still true today. There are some pastors who are good shepherds, and there are others who are hirelings. There's a vast difference between these 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 they don't do it. Teaching the hard truths is dangerous they don't do that either. Leading the sheep to places they *need* to go but don't *want* to go is too risky so they avoid it.

Jesus is the good shepherd, not a hireling. He taught hard truths that people didn't want to hear:

John 6:60-61: "Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? 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 and people needed to hear them. 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's what happens sometimes when the whole truth is proclaimed. When Jesus taught people things that they desperately needed to hear, they chose to reject Him and leave. But that didn't stop the good shepherd! Jesus led them to green pastures and still waters. The people simply refused to partake.

There are many hirelings in the world today. The world is full of pastors who care more about their jobs than the health of their congregations. Jesus was willing to sacrifice *His own life* for His sheep! He didn't hold back on His message 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 to tell the sheep what they need to hear? How many are simply hirelings?

Jesus was the good shepherd – but He's 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 warned them that one day a different shepherd would come who 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 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 11:15-17: “And the Lord said unto me, Take unto thee yet the instruments of a foolish shepherd. 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. 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 passage is talking about the antichrist. Since Israel rejected the good shepherd, God will one day raise up an evil shepherd instead. Jesus cared for the poor, healed the sick, and fed the hungry – and yet Israel rejected Him. Because of this God is going to send them a shepherd who will care *nothing* for the poor or the sick. Instead of feeding the hungry he'll tear them to pieces. Verse 17 tells us he will have a deadly wound that was healed, which brings to mind another passage of Scripture:

Revelation 13:3-4: “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. 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 believe the wicked shepherd is the antichrist. To this day the nation of Israel is still looking for peace. Israel has been beset

by war since the day they became a nation again in 1948, and they desperately want to put an end to the endless war that they've been fighting. Because of this one day they're going to make a covenant – but it will be a covenant with death:

Isaiah 28:14-15: “Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. 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 because 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 won't be forced upon them because verse 15 says they're *in agreement* with the other party of this treaty. But this covenant won't be made with someone who has their best interests at heart. This covenant isn't being made with God; instead it's made with death. It won't be made with Heaven; instead it will be made with Hell. This covenant will be based on lies. The reason Israel will agree to it is because they think it will bring peace – but God isn't impressed. Their covenant with the antichrist isn't going to usher in 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 will confirm a covenant with Israel that's supposed to last for seven years. Israel is going to believe that this covenant will bring peace, but instead it will begin the seven-year tribulation. When this evil shepherd goes into the temple and declares himself to be God, Israel will finally realize they were tricked – but by then it will be too late. At that point they will already be halfway through the tribulation and will face even worse times than what had already come to pass.

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

Isaiah 28:17-18: “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. 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 rejected the good shepherd. One day that nation will choose the evil shepherd instead, and that terrible decision will cost them many lives. Instead of finding peace they'll face destruction. Instead of escaping the overflowing scourge they will be caught by it.

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

2 Timothy 4:2-4: “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. 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; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”

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

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

Psalm 23:2-3: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 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. That raises a question: *is that what we 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 them and instead chosen the pleasures of sin? What do we *really* want?

Which shepherd do we desire: the good shepherd, who tells us things we don't want to hear and commands us to walk in paths that aren't 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 devil? It's either going to be one or the other, because those are the only two choices.