

## Psalm 23. The Lord Is Our Shepherd

'The Lord (Adonai) is my Shepherd (to feed, guide and shield me) so I will not lack (life's necessities). He makes me lie down in (fresh, tender) green pastures (an oasis of vegetation). He leads me beside the still and restful waters. He refreshes and restores my life (my whole self, my soul). He leads me in the paths of righteousness (uprightness and right standing with Him, not for my earning it but) for His name's sake. Yes, though I walk through the (deep, sunless, shadowed) ravine or valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear nor dread evil for You are with me. Your rod (to protect) and Your staff (to guide) comfort me. You arrange a (communion) table before me in the presence of my enemies (invisible evil forces). You anoint my head with oil (the Holy Spirit). My cup (of good things) overflows. Yea, only goodness, mercy, loving kindness and grace will follow me all the days of my life. For the length of my days the house God (Elohim) and His presence will be my dwelling place' (Psalm 23:1 to 6).

This Psalm is quoted in both Hebrew and English. How beautiful is this poem! The Good Shepherd is one of the often quoted phrases in the Bible when referring to God the Father and also to Jesus our Messiah. Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd and likens His genuine disciples, His followers and believers to 'sheep' and gave us a mental picture of Himself as our tending Shepherd. By working together, God the Father was the One Who orchestrated salvation for mankind and Jesus was the sacrificial Lamb (John 1:29) Who created the only way or 'door' for humanity to enter heaven. Jesus, the Good Shepherd became the Lamb sent to save us. 'The Lamb Who is in the midst of the throne shepherds them and leads them to springs of waters of life. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes' (Revelation 7:17).

Jesus often spoke in poetic language so we will explain what He was saying to the disciples. Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, anyone who does not enter by the 'door' into the sheep fold but climbs up some other way is a thief and a robber (a false prophet). Anyone who enters in by the (genuine) 'door' is the Shepherd of the sheep. The Gatekeeper (the Father) opens the gate for Him (Jesus) and the sheep listen to His voice. He calls His own sheep (Jews and Gentiles) by name and leads them out (of spiritual darkness). Whenever He brings out His own sheep, He goes before (leads) them and the sheep follow Him for they know His voice. They will never follow a stranger (false prophet or false messiah) but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." The disciples did not understand what Jesus was telling them so He said it again. "Truly I tell you, I am the 'Door' for the sheep. All (false prophets or false messiahs) who came before Me are thieves and robbers but the sheep (Jewish people) did not listen to them. I am the 'Door'. If anyone enters in (to a relationship with God) by Me, they will be saved and will go in and go out and will find pasture (Spiritual peace). The thief (the devil) only comes to steal, kill and destroy. I came so they (all genuine believers) may have (a Spiritual) life and may have it abundantly. I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand (a weak leader) and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf (devil) coming, leaves the sheep and flees. The wolf snatches the sheep and scatters them. The hired hand flees because he is a hired hand and does not care for the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd. I know My own and I am known by My own. The Father knows Me and I know the Father. I lay down My life for the sheep (Jewish people). I have other sheep (Gentiles) who are not of this fold (are not Jewish). I must bring them also and they will hear My voice. They (Jews and Gentiles) will become one flock with one Shepherd" (John 10:1 to 16).

The 'door' Jesus was speaking of is the correct way to enter heaven and that is by going through Jesus to the Father's Kingdom. To enter heaven we must accept the sacrificial blood Jesus shed on the cross when He bled and died to atone for humanity. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). "Behold, I (Jesus) stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, then I will come in to them and will dine with them and they with Me" (Revelation 3:20). Shepherds in the Western world work with their sheep much differently than shepherds in Israel. Western shepherds use sheep dogs to round up the sheep. A lot of countries have more rain than Israel so their sheep are fed on lush green grass much of the year and usually dwell in vast paddocks. If green grass is scarce because of hot weather, they are fed on bales of hay delivered to them in the paddocks. They do not have to rely on the shepherd finding food and leading them to it. Ancient shepherds, like modern shepherds in Israel were and are responsible for the wellbeing of the flock. Using His parable of the Good Shepherd would have been perfect for the disciples to understand.

The Israeli shepherd is a leader of the sheep, leading them to grass and water, protecting them from bad weather, protecting them from predators and rustlers. A good shepherd herds the flock with a tender voice, he leads them to food and water, he helps the sick or weak and searches for lost sheep. He puts his own life on hold for the wellbeing of his sheep. After grazing all day the sheep would usually be enclosed in a pen or cave for the night to protect them from predators and bad weather. In the morning the hungry sheep would rush through the opened gate and out to pasture. In Israel, rain usually falls between October and May so once the weather changes, fields can become dry for several months until the next rainy season. Lush

pastures only last until the sheep have devoured it and it starts to dry out. We can imagine a shepherd walking with his sheep following behind, and he expects them to follow no matter what the terrain. The sheep keep watching the shepherd as walks and he rarely glances behind. If any sheep stray, it is not for long when they will run to catch up with the flock. When the shepherd turns and stands still, the sheep will then eat their fill because the shepherd knows where their suitable food source is. The few lovely green valleys in Israel are usually reserved for human agriculture and food. Shepherds lead their sheep to areas not suitable for agriculture, like rocky terrain or steep hillsides. These conditions are normal for Israel just as they were when Jesus was there to teach the disciples. All genuine believers are the sheep of God's pasture and follow His directions. "I Myself will be the Shepherd of My sheep and I will cause them to lie down (to rest)," says the Lord ... "You My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, are men (and women) and I am your God," says the Lord' (Ezekiel 34:15 & 31).

When Jesus taught the Israelites 2,000 years ago, He used many verbal images to describe His mission. Western people often cannot understand His message because He taught solely from His Hebrew Scriptures, which was the Old Testament. The New Testament was not yet written so Jesus relied heavily on the Hebrew Scriptures. He said He is the Good Shepherd Who lays down His life for His sheep (John 10:11). We might think of a good shepherd as a warm loving image but Jesus' audience would have been shocked by this analogy. First century Jewish people knew their Scriptures well and would have known many Scriptures alluded to the Messiah as being the Shepherd. For example, 'Behold, the Lord (Jesus) will come as a Mighty One ... He will (Spiritually) feed His flock like a Shepherd. He will gather the lambs (children and new converts) in His arm and carry them on His shoulders. He will gently lead those who have their young' (Isaiah 40:10 & 11). Jesus was affirming He was the Messiah, the Sovereign Lord, God Himself. In some verses in the Bible, the Shepherd is God Himself. God Himself would come as the Shepherd and Jesus said He was the fulfilment of these verses. Through His words His listeners would have heard His powerful claim, not only was He the Messiah but God incarnate Who came to earth to rescue His people. Jesus asked, "Which of you men, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one who was lost until he found it? When he has found it, he carries it on his shoulders, rejoicing. When he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance" (Luke 15:4 to 7). These verses correspond with words of the prophet Ezekiel. "Thus says the Lord, 'Behold, I Myself, even I will search for My sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock in the day he is among his sheep that are scattered abroad, so will I seek out My sheep'" (Ezekiel 34:11 & 12).

There are responsibilities on the shoulders of the human 'sheep' too. It is not entirely up to our Shepherd. Sheep must know the Shepherd, we must know, hear and obey His voice and we must follow Him, trust Him and love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30). Knowing the Lord is much more than a casual, "Hi God. Me again!" The word 'know' in this context is not merely having knowledge. This 'know' is the Scriptural term for intimacy. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "I know My sheep and I am known by My own." This type of knowing is a deep, loving, lifetime relationship with the Lord that develops and grows by spending quality time with Him in prayer, worship, Bible study and fellowshiping with other believers, both Jews and Gentiles. Knowing and recognising the voice of our Shepherd takes time. Jesus said His sheep hear and recognise His voice and follow Him but will ignore or flee from a stranger's voice. This degree of recognition when the Lord is speaking, takes many hours of listening during normal prayer time. When we spend time with Jesus it is always a good idea to be still and quiet so we can focus our hearts on hearing His guidance, suggestions or direct instructions, usually via the Word of God. To obey Him we must be able to hear Him. Following is a crucial part of our walk with the Lord. Sheep who hear but ignore the voice of the Shepherd will miss out on blessings and privileges open to those who follow Him. The Lord's ear is open to our prayers (Psalm 34:15) so too our ears must be open to His voice.

Several remarkable men and women of God listened intently to the voice of God. Some of these people of God were Enoch (Genesis 5:24), Noah (Genesis 6:22), Abraham (Genesis 22:1 & 11), Jacob (Genesis 31:11; 46:2), Manoah's unnamed wife and mother of Samson (Judges 13:3 to 6), Samuel (1 Samuel 3:4 & 10), Esther (Book of Esther), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8), Daniel (Daniel 10:12) and Moses who was a shepherd, contentedly working for his father-in-law Jethro when God called him to deliver the Children of Israel from the Egyptians (Exodus chapters 2 to 4). The moment God called him, Moses responded by saying, "Here I am." He knew the voice of God. Moses became the best leader the world has ever known. Nobody has ever accomplished what Moses did with the humility he exhibited. Moses is the only man to have ever spoken to God face to face like a man speaks to his friend (Exodus 33:11). Moses was appointed by the Lord but never became proud of it, instead he leaned heavily on the Lord for everything. One amazing woman of God was of course Mary, the mother of Jesus who obeyed God and brought forth our Messiah, the Lamb of God (Luke 1:27 to 35).

Good shepherds are good leaders. The word Pastor comes from the root word for pasture. God expects modern shepherds or pastors to provide for their own flocks like a shepherd provides for his sheep. The Lord puts Christian leaders in place to shepherd His 'sheep'. A wise pastor recognises the responsibilities given to him and knows his leadership and strength comes only from the Lord. Anyone in church leadership needs to realise they cannot be lazy, weak, controlling or uncertain. Strong leadership takes faith, strength, courage, humility, faithfulness, energy, compassion and a lot of patience. They need to be able to make wise decisions, sometimes instantly if the need arises. They need to lead by example by listening to the voice of God and following Him wholeheartedly. Their leadership responsibilities never take a rest. There are always sheep within their flock who need tending, feeding, nurturing, care and sometimes to be restored, all with the pure love of the Lord. A true leader will always put the needs of his flock before his own needs. He has to be a man of integrity, honesty and learned in the Scriptures. As Jesus said, a good shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep. Jesus seemed to love the Psalms so much they became a constant part of His verbal imagery. He said many of the Psalms referred to Him (Luke 24:44). He quoted the Psalms regularly, even during His agonising death. "My God, why have you forsaken Me?" (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46). "Into Your hands I commit My Spirit" (Psalm 31:5; Luke 23:46).

There are many pastors who have given up and quit because they felt the call on their lives was too heavy for them and they fail to fulfil their duty call of God. There are many failed pastors around. All Christian leaders are under the authority of the Lord but they also need to be in submission to other leaders. They are not 'islands' and must have regular 'debriefings' with other leaders. When God puts someone in leadership it is the duty of the sheep to support, encourage, respect and pray for them. Support from the sheep can help the shepherd fulfil his calling. Without that support, pastors can fail. Leadership is a huge responsibility requiring much more than just preaching. According to the Bible, God's plan for the church is for a relationship to be established between the leader, the sheep and the Lord that reveals evidence of trust and loyalty. It is not the place of the sheep to gossip about the leader, to criticise him or his family, to undermine him or his leadership, or to attempt to overthrow him. If he does behave in a way that is out of line with the Scriptures, the other leaders must act according to the guidelines written in the Bible.

God expects a higher level of behaviour from His pastors, leaders, priests, ministers, or whatever title they give themselves. Leaders will be judged more harshly than their sheep (James 3:1). Before we can teach anyone, we first need to be able to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. 'The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name will teach you all things and will remind you of all I said to you' (John 14:26). Now more than ever in this age of unsaved people who deny the existence of God, we need to turn our eyes towards the Lord and focus on our eternal lives while still living Godly lives on earth. We need to commit ourselves to Him, get to 'know' Him more deeply, worship Him at home not just in church and be the living sacrifices for Him as He was for us, when as our Shepherd, He laid down His life for us. 'I urge you, brothers by the mercies of God, present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your Spiritual service' (Romans 12:1). "Greater love has no man than lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). 'When the Chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away' (1 Peter 5:4). 'From now on, there is stored up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the Righteous Judge will give to me on Judgement Day, and not to me only but also to all those who have loved His appearing' (2 Timothy 4:8). 'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul will be joyful in my God for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness' (Isaiah 61:10). 'Jesus Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross so we, having died to sin, might live to righteousness, by Whose stripes you were healed. You were going astray like sheep but now have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls' (1 Peter 2:24 & 25).

Amen and God bless you.

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