

“Christ as the Shepherd – Part 1”

Psalm 23:1-3

Introduction

You can't read the first verse of Psalm 23 without coming to the conclusion that this Psalm is all about Christ: *“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”*

Why do I say that? Well I suppose if you look closely at v.1 the word LORD is all in capitals – that's how the English translators wrote down the unutterable holy name of God – Jehovah, or Yahweh. So the Old Testament Creator God, the Covenant making and Covenant keeping God could be seen as the One who is my shepherd.

But whenever we come into the New Testament and we come to John ch.10 and we hear the Lord Jesus Christ, now come as a man among men, saying these words:

“I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” (v.14)

And again,

*“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
(v.11).*

What is that, but the Lord Jesus Christ taking upon himself something that was only said about God in the Old Testament and particularly here in Psalm 23?

If the Jews knew their Psalms at all, which of course they did, then they would have known from Jesus' statements in John ch.10 that he was claiming to be none other than God come in the flesh – and what's more he had come to lay down his life for his sheep! That's why it could be truly said of him that he was *‘The **Good Shepherd**.’*

The New Testament also goes on to call Jesus *‘The **Great Shepherd**’* in Hebrews 13:20 by virtue of the fact that he has now been brought back from the dead:

*“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead **our Lord Jesus, that Great Shepherd of the sheep**, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”*

And finally it goes on to call him, *‘The **Chief Shepherd**’* when he comes again to reward all the under-shepherds – the pastors and elders – for their work of caring for the flock in 1 Peter 5:1-4. There Peter, who counted himself as an elder among his fellow elders in the church, exhorted them to:

*“Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when **the Chief Shepherd appears**, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”*

And so we see from this brief survey of Scripture that the one that Psalm 23 speaks of when it says *“The Lord is my Shepherd”* is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, who claimed to be *the **Good Shepherd*** and who was later because of his resurrection

from the dead called *the Great Shepherd* and who will when he returns be seen to be *the Chief Shepherd*. That is the One that Psalm 23 is talking about.

In fact, Psalm 22 is all about *Christ on the Cross*, Psalm 23 is *Christ as the Shepherd*, and Psalm 24 is *Christ as the King!* – So here we have three Psalms all about Christ.

Now even though it only has six verses, many have tried to break Psalm 23 up into many different divisions. Some see the first half as talking about the shepherd and the sheep, but the last part talking about something different - a royal host and his guest. Some even add in a middle section about the traveller and his companion. (v.4). But all such divisions only destroy the beauty of this Psalm.

It was two little books – one brought out in the 1930s called “*The Song of our Syrian Guest*” by W.A. Knight showing that all of the Psalm can be seen as depicting an Eastern Shepherd as he goes about the work of looking after his sheep, and another one more recently in the 1970s by Phillip Keller called, “*A shepherd looks at Psalm 23*” that have helped us to see that the Psalm is a unity – and it does all describe a Shepherd in his relationship with his sheep, or better the relationship that the sheep can have with their shepherd.

Phillip Keller lived in East Africa. He grew up in an area where sheep farming was very common indeed – right down by the shores of the Indian Ocean. For eight years he owned a ranch or farm and looked after his own flock of sheep. But then later in life he became a pastor of a church in East Africa and there he preached a series of sermons that he then put together in this book – ‘*A shepherd looks at Psalm 23.*’

It is a wonderful little book, and throughout it he shows how every phrase of this Psalm describes another part of what is involved in shepherding sheep and the spiritual lessons that can be drawn from it. In fact Keller believes that the six verses of the Psalm describe a year’s cycle in the life of a shepherd and his sheep.

The Psalm was of course written by David, who not only was the Shepherd-King of Israel, but long before that as a boy had shepherded sheep for his father Jesse around the hills of Bethlehem. So it’s no surprise that he could think of his relationship with his God in the same way as his sheep had a relationship with him as their shepherd.

1. The LORD is my Shepherd. (v.1)

He begins very clearly by saying, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” Not only was he saying something that was a fact – the Lord is a shepherd to his people. But he was saying more than that – he was saying something that was deeply personal – ‘The Lord is MY shepherd.’ Before we go any further can I ask you that question – can you say that the Lord is *my* shepherd? Does he know you, and do you know him? (John 10:14) Do you know that he laid down his life personally on the cross for you? (John 10:11). In other words do you know if Jesus is not only your Shepherd, but your Saviour too?

In Psalm 100:3 it says, “*Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*” We are his sheep because he created us. But we need to go further than that. We are also his sheep according to Isaiah 53:6 because he has paid the purchase price for us – he has bought us – “*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*” He has bought us with his own blood – we are not our own!

But something else - if we really appreciate the fact that not only has God made us, but that he has also bought us back to himself by his own blood - then we shouldn't ever want to belong to anybody else. We should forever want to belong to Christ.

If that is the case then in the OT if a slave didn't want to leave his master when the year of Jubilee came around, the master took him to the door post of his house and pierced his ear with an awl and that was the mark of ownership for the rest of his life. In the world of farming, tagging is the proof of ownership – the tag in the ear has the herd number on it – showing whose herd the animal belongs to. Nowadays with sheep they mark their backs with a coloured dye to show whose sheep it is, but in the east they used to take the sheep's ear, lay it down on a block of wood and cut a mark with a killing knife into the sheep's ear. That special mark proved whose sheep it was – who he belonged to. **Do you belong to Christ?** If you do, then you shouldn't ever want to belong to anybody else, because you know with Christ you will lack nothing.

Because if Christ is your Saviour, your Shepherd, your Lord – and he is really owner / master of your life, then you should be able to say with absolute assurance the next bit too: ***Because the Lord is my shepherd, that's why “I shall not be in want.”*** Because of his character, because of who he is – the covenant making and the covenant keeping God, the one who laid down his life for you, the one who loves you with an everlasting love – that's why you know for sure that he will do everything in his power to make sure you will not be in want – you will lack no good thing!

That doesn't mean you will always be healthy, wealthy and wise, (we need to get those ideas of prosperity out of our minds once and for all) but it does mean that Christ promises to provide for all that you need. His own reputation depends on it!

The LORD is my shepherd, that's why I'll not be in want.

What's the alternative? There is only one other owner or master in this world, and that's the devil. Either we belong to Christ, or we belong to him. One or the other. *‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy’* – that's what the devil does for you. But what did Jesus say? *“I have come that you might have life – life in all its fullness!”* (John 10:10) – *more abundant life!* It's because of who your shepherd is, that you can say for sure you will never be in want.

2. But what does this Shepherd do for us? (vs.2-3)

Well read on – that's only the first verse:

“He makes me to lie down in green pastures.”

“He leads me beside quiet waters / still waters.”

“He restores my soul.”

“He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

There you have it again – why does he do all of these things? **For his name’s sake!** For the sake of his own reputation as a shepherd. That’s why he does it. He claims to be the **good** shepherd and his Word tells us he’s a **great** shepherd and even the **chief** shepherd. That’s some reputation to protect, and shepherds want to be known as good shepherds. He does all of these things for the sake of his own good name.

- “He makes me to lie down in green pastures.”

Did you know it’s hard to get a sheep to lie down?

I’m told, a sheep will only lie down and be at peace: (i) If they are free from all fear. (ii) If they are free from friction within the flock. (iii) If they are free from parasites, pests or flies. (iv) If they are free from hunger and not still looking for more food. Sheep are ruminants of course, and when they lie down they do so to chew the cud. But they’ll not lie down until they are content. But it says *‘he makes me to lie down in green pastures.’* It’s the shepherd’s job to make sure his sheep are free from all of these annoyances – fear, friction, pests and hunger. That’s why he makes sure they’ve had good pasture that day. To make sure they’re not still hungry. That’s why he makes sure he has dipped them or treated them for parasites or pests or flies, so that they’ll not be driven to distraction. That’s why he comes and stands among the flock sometimes and looks over his sheep - because sometimes **his very presence** is enough to calm his frightened, nervous sheep. Sometimes when he leaves the flock all sorts of bickering and fighting and butting goes on because just as there’s ‘a pecking order’ among hens, and ‘a horning order’ among cattle, there is ‘a butting order’ among sheep. All trying to make out they’re more important than the next one. But when the shepherd goes and stands in the field they know then who is really important and the friction and rivalry calms down.

Just the sense of the shepherd’s presence is often enough to sort so much out and to calm the sheep down. In Exodus ch.33: 14-15 God said to Moses, *“MY presence will go with you and I will give you rest / peace.”* That’s all Moses wanted to know as the under-shepherd for the flock of Israel – that God’s presence would go with them, otherwise he didn’t want to lead the people up from there. The shepherd’s presence is enough to give rest and peace to frightened and nervous sheep. Jesus’ last words to his disciples and so to us were, *“Lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* In other words ‘as you go out on world mission, don’t be afraid, I’ll still be with you.’

But as well as food; sheep need water too. They can dry up so easily and become dehydrated particularly in the hot eastern sun. So it says, *‘he leads me beside still waters or quiet waters.’ (v.2)* This might be a stream or a watering trough that the shepherd has found for the sheep, but Phillip Keller points out it might just be the shepherd’s practice of getting up early with his sheep and taking them out to the fields around dawn while the dew is still heavy on the grass and letting them eat their fill.

What could be described more as still waters than the dew on the grass? And Keller says that the moisture the sheep get from a heavy dew on the grass will be enough to have them lying down in complete contentment, chewing their cud by the time the sun is up in the middle of the day. Keller reminds us that perhaps the best time of the day for us to get refreshment from our shepherd is first thing in the day, before the busyness sets in and we can't seem to find the time. Do you set aside the first part of your day to spend time in God's Word refreshing your soul? Do you set aside *anytime* in your day for it? Well maybe that's why we can become so spiritually dehydrated. It's time to get our souls refreshed and revived.

What about '***he restores my soul?***' (v.3) In Psalm 42-43 David asks himself the question again and again, "*Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.*"

David knew what it was like at times to be downcast in his soul. Spiritually down. Down cast or cast down. It is very easy for a sheep to get cast down – when it falls over and can't get up again it is said to be 'cast.' With its heavy woollen fleece, a sheep is top heavy, it may fall over, or it may simply lie down on its side to relax, but then roll over and end up with its feet in the air and unable to right itself. If it's a hot day the gases in its stomach can build up and it can be dead in a very short space of time. It is up to the shepherd to be among his sheep, to keep an eye on his sheep and look out for any that are missing, because more often than not this is the reason - they have fallen down and can't get up. In a hot land the vultures (or here the carrion crows) would already begin to gather and circle around, because they know that death is near. But do you remember the story Jesus told in the Gospels about the shepherd who had a hundred sheep, but discovered that one of them was missing? What did he do, he left the 99 that were alright, and he went out and hunted for that sheep that was missing until he found it, and this was probably the reason why – it had become cast down, unable to get up. The shepherd has to right the sheep, rub her legs until the numbness goes and the feeling comes back, and then if it's not too heavy he puts it on his shoulders and he comes home rejoicing having found the sheep that was lost, the one that was near dead, but now is alive again!

Maybe you are cast down in your soul today, spiritually down. Well the good shepherd doesn't make fun of your depression as some Christians are prone to do, he wants to come alongside you and help you up, get you back on your feet again, and get you going once more. He wants more than anything your spiritual contentment. Isn't it time you looked for his help today to get back on your feet and going again?

"He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." (v.3)

Here the shepherd begins to lead the sheep out from around the home farm - he's taking them to new pastures. He leads them along the right paths, paths of righteousness, not the wrong ones. He never leads them astray, or down a blind alley, he's leading them purposefully out to better places for the sheep's own good.

Guidance is a wonderful thing in the Christian life. We have a Saviour who is also our Shepherd – that means he’s our guide. He has promised to lead us into all truth. He’s promised if we stop leaning on our own understanding and acknowledge him in all our ways that he will direct our paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6). But sometimes guidance is the hardest thing to discover. If you’re facing a decision then you’ll know what I mean. You want to do the right thing. You want to go the right way. You want to do what God wants, but sometimes it’s hard to know what that is. Well it’s simply up to us as sheep to follow. Here in the West, sheep and cattle are driven from the back – sometimes by people, sometimes by sheep dogs. But in the East that would never have happened. Over there the shepherd goes before his sheep, calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. He goes before them, he calls them to follow him, and they do. That’s the amazing thing. They follow him, because they know his voice. If you earnestly want to know God’s Will in your life, you will know the way to go, when you need to know it. The Good Shepherd will not let you lag behind or get lost. He will lead you after him at just the right time and along the right paths. Just keep listening for his voice as you read His Word, and bring all your decisions to him in prayer. He’ll not let you miss your sign-posts along the way. Just follow him.

Now I’m going to stop there this evening. I know we’ve only looked at 3 verses of one of the shortest Psalms in the Bible. But this is a well loved Psalm and there is so much in it. Next week I’ll take up the last 3 verses of this Psalm and look at them with you. If you’ve enjoyed what we’ve looked at so far this tonight, do your best to come back again next week, and we’ll look at those verses that have brought so much comfort to so many:

(v.4) *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*
Jesus will be with you in the Valley

(v.5) *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*
Jesus will provide for you at the Table

(v.6) *Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”*
Jesus will take you Home forever

Conclusion

But for this evening I just want to make sure that you do know the LORD, really know him, not just as your Creator, but as your Saviour and as your Shepherd? Put your trust in Him afresh tonight and begin to follow him more closely in the days ahead.

If you do know Jesus as your Saviour and Shepherd, then is he really your LORD? The one you belong to, more than anything else. Are you glad of his ownership in your life, so much so that you wouldn't want to belong to anyone else? Do you have his mark of ownership upon your life? Not the red dye on your back, or the piercing in your ear, but I suppose the mark of ownership today for us as believers would be believers' baptism – it's like a badge saying, I belong to Christ. It's publicly declaring to the watching world that you are His, and He is yours, forever.

And do you allow him to do all these things for you day by day:

- Give you spiritual food and spiritual refreshment in his Word each day.
- Pick you up when you fall down or get cast down as a Christian.
- Lead and guide you through your life here on earth, along the paths that he wants you to follow, not just the way that you want to go?

Let Him do all those things for you, because it's for his own name's sake that he wants to be a Good Shepherd to you. If the Lord's your shepherd, you shall not want!