

Sermon by Paul Hudson, Rose Hill Church.

We are continuing this morning in the series “Names of God.” We will look at a popular motif in the Bible, God as the Shepherd. The main part of my message will take on the form of an expository sermon rather than topical, going through the 23rd Psalm verse-by-verse, and along the way we will stop by a couple of other passages: one in Ezekiel and another in the Gospel of John. Before we get into the exposition of Psalm 23, I will give you some relevant background information on the shepherding practice of the Ancient Near East. Since sheep herding is not the norm around here, a lot of you may have never even seen a real shepherd with his sheep. So I have a picture here of a real life shepherd with her sheep from the ancient near east (**Picture**).

First, let’s peak at the term, **Jehovah Rohi (Ro-EE), which means God our Shepherd. Ro-EE means “shepherd or herdsman”, and its verb Ra-ah means “to tend or lead” flocks and herds. As a metaphor in the Bible, to shepherd means to lead or to rule.** This term is used as a name of God in the OT just a couple of times, but the analogy of God as a shepherd is used extensively in the Bible.

Since we live in a region and culture where shepherding is uncommon, I’d like to take a very quick look at a few key details about shepherding in the ANE.

1. **The shepherd image in the Bible signifies a nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life.**¹ Shepherds didn’t have a fenced-in plot of farmland in their backyard, they had to move around, sometimes great distances to find pasture and water. This meant that the shepherd and the flock were usually together day and night, out in the wild for long periods of time and moving around often. The resources were often scant with very little pasture and not enough water.
2. **Though the shepherd way of life was nomadic, the good shepherds never wandered, they knew exactly where they were going.**² Shepherds followed grazing paths that were determined by the distance between their night camps, the water source, and the pastures. The good shepherds needed to understand the limitations of their animals, and they needed to be very familiar with the area, otherwise they would lose their flock. So a good shepherd knew the right paths to follow that would suit the needs of their specific flock.
3. Shepherds had other animals such as goats, cattle, and camels, but the **sheep were high-maintenance, dependent animals that would die in no time**

¹ Thomas A. Golding, “The Imagery of Shepherding in the Bible, Part 2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163, no. April-June 2006 (April 2006): 159.

² Golding, 164.

without a shepherd.³ As well, sheep were extremely near-sighted and dumb, prone to wandering off and being unable to find their way back, even when the sheepfold was within sight. But sheep can be trained to respond to only their shepherd's voice. I heard a story about sheep recognizing the shepherd's voice—a professor watched a demonstration of a shepherd calling out to his sheep, and he asked if all the sheep recognized his voice. The shepherd said that only the wild sheep and the sick sheep do not recognize his voice. He said the wild sheep can be trained to recognize his voice in time, but the sick sheep will not come. The implication is that the shepherd has to personally pick up the sick sheep and tend to them. Sick sheep need the personal touch of the shepherd.

4. The fourth thing I want to look at is two relevant items the shepherd carried—a staff and a rod, among other items. **The staff was used as a walking aid, and to help guide sheep that might wander off the path. The rod was used for counting sheep- he would count them as they passed under the rod and into the sheepfold— and it also functioned as a weapon for protection,** both against human bandits and animal predators.⁴
5. The fifth detail about shepherding is the sheepfold. A sheepfold functioned as temporary, mostly natural pen for the sheep. Usually, they were caves or partial caves, or pens with boundaries made of stone topped with thorny branches **(Picture)**. The entrance was built in such a way that the shepherd could lay across it to act as a door, so he would personally protect the sheep. Predators or thieves could not get into the sheepfold without getting past the shepherd, and the sheep could not wander out of the sheepfold. Some larger sheepfolds could contain more than one flock, so a gate-keeper would open the door for the shepherd, who would stand outside the gate and call their flock out from the other flocks with only their voice.⁵
6. The final detail is the responsibility of the shepherds. They were **tasked with ensuring the survival of the flock**, to guide them, feed them, protect and deliver them from predators, thieves, and other dangers. They needed to be able to heal them and care for them, to give them security and rest, and ensure that they were healthy producers of wool, among other things. Good shepherds were known to be wise, strong, brave, and gentle, and as noted earlier, they understood the needs of their flock.⁶

³ Golding, 161.

⁴ Golding, 167-69

⁵ Golding, 171-72.

⁶ Golding, 173-74.

So that is some background on shepherding in the ANE. Now let's turn to Psalm 23.

We know the 23rd Psalm was written by King David, who grew up herding sheep. Because of David's extensive background as a shepherd, there is quite a bit of shepherding imagery in the 23rd Psalm, and it is all designed to illicit certain strong emotions in the reader. In fact, the shepherding imagery is a pervasive theme in the whole Bible from Abel, the first shepherd in Genesis, all the way to Jesus, the Great Shepherd in Revelation. This is natural because shepherds were as common in ancient Israel as loggers are in Washington State. So David knew what he was talking about, and he had specific images in mind when wrote the 23rd Psalm- keep some of that background in mind as we go through this.

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

With an emphasis on “my,” The Lord is MY shepherd. David chose not to say the Lord is a shepherd, or the Lord is the shepherd, because he wanted to convey nearness to the Lord. “My” speaks of ownership and intimacy. Of all the metaphors used of God in the psalms, the shepherd metaphor paints the clearest picture of God's nearness to his own, God's intimacy with his flock.⁷ God as the king describes his majesty, power, and rule but such an analogy places God at a distance. God as a rock, fortress, or shield are powerful symbols that describe his protection and reliability, but these are impersonal analogies that fall short of the warmth of personal touch. God as a deliverer, warrior, or savior describes his saving work for humankind but still fails to portray the kind of intimacy with the Lord that we possess. But- God as MY shepherd places me in close proximity to God, where He lives amongst his flock as its guide, protector, healer, & provider. Because of our shepherd's nearness, we will not lack guidance. We will not lack protection. We will not lack the healing touch of his presence. We will lack nothing. My friends, is the Lord your shepherd? This morning, the Lord invites you into his sheepfold, will you learn to hear his voice?

Psalm 23:2: He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

The Lord our shepherd knows the limits of his sheep. He senses when we need a place of rest. Still waters in Hebrew means “waters of rest” or “waters to rest

⁷ Derek Kidner. *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 15. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), Psalm 23:1.

by.”⁸ Are you in need of a place of peaceful rest? How great is it to know that the Lord knows when you need rest. This verse implies a journey led by the wisest shepherd of all. When we live without the shepherd or follow a different shepherd, the journey is ultimately arduous, full of peril and pain, aimless, and without a life-giving final destination. The journey the Lord leads us through is not an easy journey by any means, but it is a purposeful, awe-inspiring journey that leads to the final destination of eternal life. Along the way in this great journey are places of rest, for the Lord our shepherd knows the journey is long and difficult, and he will not drive us like a herdsman drives his cattle.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake (verse 3).

This great journey led by the Lord our shepherd requires his nourishment and refreshing. A hired hand cares nothing for the flock, nor does a lazy shepherd. If the sheep venture off or become sick, the hired-hand would do more care for his own safety and needs than that of a weary or wandering sheep. But **the Lord heals, restores, and leads his own on the right paths because they belong to him and he belongs to them.** In Matthew 9:35-36, Jesus was going around teaching and healing people in all the cities and towns and when he looked out at the crowds, the Scripture says, “he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (ESV). It is too easy to get lost in this world. When an animal gets lost and wanders outside of its realm of protection, it becomes instant prey. Predators harass helpless prey until they are able to eat them. The Lord tends to his weary, wandering sheep; he revives them and sets them back on the right path. You might feel harassed and helpless in this world, if that is you, the Lord invites you into his sheepfold- come and be healed.

Verse 4 says, 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.

The right path in the journey of the Great Shepherd moves from lush green pastures and restful waters to valleys where death lurks in the shadows all around. **The Hebrew term for “shadow of death” here is actually one word, Salmawet, which literally means “utter darkness.”**⁹ Can everyone say this word with me? “Salmawet.” (Tsal-maw-vet). **Figuratively, Salmawet means the grave, or place of the dead, deep distress, and grave danger.** Job 38:17 translates this same term

⁸ Kidner, Psalm 23:2.

⁹ Benjamin M. Austin, “Afterlife.” *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), צְלִמְוֶת (Salmawet).

as “gates of death.”¹⁰ On this journey with the shepherd, there will be times where Salmawet— that is, deep distress, grave danger, and death surround us. One day each of us will face the grave but because of our nearness to God, we do not need to fear. Can you say this with me? **“When Salmawet surrounds me I will not fear because the Lord is with me.”** “The Lord is with me,” here, the shepherd has gone from leading out in front to being alongside the sheep to escort them through the Salmawet. David wants us to see a picture of the shepherd personally escorting his sheep through the salmawet with a rod in one hand and a staff in the other. The rod for fending off unwelcome predators, the staff for guiding the sheep along the right path. Eventually, our journey will come to an end. Remember, the journey the Lord leads us through ultimately ends with eternal life, but all of us must face the gates of death first. There is only one who can lead us straight through the gates of death to the other side. All other shepherds or companions must turn back and let the traveller go through alone. Well, I will say that when you approach those gates of death, you will find Jesus alongside you, and you will not be left alone. Do not fear, the Lord is with you.

I’m going to pause the exposition right here and drop into two other passages to fill out this study on God our shepherd. You might have noticed in Psalm 23 that the shepherd imagery abruptly vanishes in the final two verses. When I first sat down to study this Psalm in-depth, I was jarred at how suddenly David drops the shepherd metaphor and completely turns to more human terms. I believe this is by design, and we will look at it in the conclusion. Right now, let’s read from Ezekiel 34. This whole chapter is a prophetic word for the end-times, about how God will rescue and lead his people Israel to a covenant of peace, as a shepherd. I am just going to read through most of this chapter and just let it speak for itself because it is so powerful- I just want you to hear this, so we won’t put the scripture on the screen. I’m picking this up at verse 11. Verses 1 through 11 is an oracle against the shepherds of Israel who have not done their duty in shepherding God’s people. God said he is going to remove those lazy, irresponsible shepherds and rescue the sheep himself. Starting with verse 11- just close your eyes as I read this out loud and listen to this prophecy:

¹¹ “For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will

¹⁰ Kidner, Psalm 23:4.

feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong (that is, the lazy shepherds) I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

Skip down to verse 22:

²² I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³ And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken.

The Lord's Covenant of Peace

²⁵ "I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. ²⁶ And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. ²⁷ And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land. And they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslaved them. ²⁸ They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them. They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid. ²⁹ And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations. ³⁰ And they shall know that I am the Lord their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord God. ³¹ And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord God."

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eze 34:11–31.

This incredible prophecy is directed at the people of Israel, but the question is, **do we, who are not the people of Israel, have a part in this covenant of peace, as the sheep of the Lord's pasture?** Let's look at John 10:7-16. In this passage, Jesus is speaking with the pharisees about their blindness and failure to lead the people of Israel. In verse 7, Jesus said, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and**

scatters them. ¹³ **He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.** Now listen very carefully to this part, notice the intimacy between the sheep and the shepherd: ¹⁴ **I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.** Pause for a second—the bond of relationship that we have with our Lord Jesus is the same bond that Jesus has with the Father. Think about that—the bond of the Trinity is perhaps the tightest relational bond there is. There is no tighter relational bond than the bond shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet, we are brought into the same type of bond in our relationship with Jesus. Reading on, here is the most important part for us:¹⁶ **And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.**

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 10:7–16.

The other sheep are none other than you and I and all other believers in the world, who are allowed to come into God's sheepfold of peace. Thank God, we are the human sheep of God's pasture through Christ Jesus! Now keep your finger in John 10 and turn back to Psalm 23 and we will finish the exposition of the final two verses.

As I said before, the shepherd analogy ends with verse 4, and now we are brought into more human terms. I believe David did this to show that even though a good shepherd shares a special bond of friendship with his sheep, the reality is that a shepherd and sheep are man and animal- they are not truly compatible companions. The analogy of who we really are in God's eyes cannot be realized in the sheep metaphor. Here we move from one sense of intimacy to a whole new level of intimacy and nearness to God.¹¹

Verse 5- You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

The picture of the table is not a simple table with a glass of water and a sandwich set on it. This picture is a fully-set table with oil for the face, which is a sign of festive gladness, and a brimming cup, set in the presence of our enemies.¹² **The picture is one of victorious celebration, like the festive celebration of a war won.**¹³ A war won over what enemy? Remember what came just before this verse? Our true enemy is not any person, tribe, or nation on this planet. Our true enemy

¹¹ Kidner, Psalm 23:5.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

lurks in that shadow of death- it is evil, sin, and death. My friends, more than leading us through the valley of Salmawet, our Good Shepherd, Jesus, has defeated those enemies of our soul, and he bids us to come to his table of celebration right now, even as those powerless enemies surround us! Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, “behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” (ESV). We are not dumb sheep, the stupidest animals on the planet. We are made in the image of God, unique, and built especially for intimate relationship with our Creator. We are made to dine at the table, in a feast of celebration with our God! Will you open the door of your heart to him just as he opens the door for you to his sheepfold?

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The final verse is how our journey progresses and where it finishes— at our true home where we belong, blessed with the goodness and mercy of the Lord throughout our days. **The word “forever” here is actually “length of days” in the Hebrew, not necessarily implying eternity.¹⁴ The implication is that we do not have to wait until we die to have the goodness and mercy of the Lord.** His invitation to dwell and dine with him is for us today, for the rest of our lives, and forever, not as one-time guests, but as his very own. How special is it to be invited to dine with the Creator of the universe in his own house, not as a guest, but as a permanent resident? Now I want to turn back to **John 10:27-28 to finish this message: Jesus said, “my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”**

If you have put your faith in Jesus, then you have started out on a life-long journey filled with purpose, and a final destination of eternal life. You will never walk this journey alone, for the Lord is near you, leading you, and even by your side. Even as the perils of this world surround you, Jesus is preparing a victory table for you to sit and eat with him. There is nothing that can separate you from the Lord’s presence, he is with you always. Let’s pray.

¹⁴ Kidner, Psalm 23:6.

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