

“Our Shepherd’s Person”

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First in a series on Psalm 23

Psalm 23

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Please read Psalm 23. If you’re reading this online, you can see this Scripture selection [by clicking here](#).

Shepherds are leaders.

They provide for the flock, food to eat and water to drink. They guard the flock from dangers. They guide the flock to where it needs to go. They secure the flock, and with the shepherd the sheep feel safe. All this is the shepherd leading the flock.

When picturing this, try not to imagine an idyllic, peaceful meadow of a southern Ontario countryside. No, this is the rugged Judean wilderness. You’re on your own there.¹ Sheep are in danger. Thieves might steal them. Predators might devour them. Vipers might poison them. Dust storms might swallow them. Rock slides might crush them. Burning heat might broil them. Scarcity of food might famish them.

In such a place, sheep need to be led. They need a shepherd.

We need shepherds. We need to be led, and led well. We are realizing this more than ever. Facing crisis and tragedy . . . with communities besieged, nations locked down, the world in turmoil, and creation crying out . . . leadership is vital. This is also true in more “ordinary” times. We still need good leaders. We just might not notice their importance quite so much.

We are led by other things too, not just people or organizations. We might be led by our hopes—what encourages us. Our fears—what worries us. Our ambitions—what we want. Our optimism—things will get better. Our pessimism—things will get worse. Our confusion—we don’t know where to turn. Our trust—we know who to follow.

What leads you these days? Who is leading you? Can you trust them?

II

The idea of calling leaders “shepherds” makes sense. Almost 1000 years before this psalm, King Hammurabi of Babylon produced an influential code of law. At the end, he had written:

*I am the shepherd who brings well-being and abundant prosperity; my rule is just . . . so that the strong might not oppress the weak, and that even the orphan and the widow might be treated with justice.*²

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A thousand-year journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 37.

² Quoted in the Wikipedia article about Psalm 23. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_23#Shepherd_theme

Hammurabi was a good leader.

But we know many are not. Some leaders are corrupt, ill-hearted, self-serving. Some leaders are incompetent and foolish. Some are simply unlucky.

This is from the biblical prophet Ezekiel, God's word against the bad leaders of God's people.

The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed those who are ill or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them."³

When the shepherd is poor, the sheep suffer. So it really matters who your shepherd is.

III

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

"For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There

³ Ezekiel 34:1-6 (NIV). I played an audio recording of the reading, from *The Bible Experience*, read by Corey Reynolds (Ezekiel) and Paul Adefarasin (God).

*they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord.*⁴

IV

The Lord is my Shepherd.

A very important realization was given to me a few years ago. I was struggling with the various demands of my life, the multiple pulls in different directions, and the many good-hearted people who offered many good (and some not-so-good) ideas about what I should be doing. The realization I received came in the form of a question: *Who do you work for?*

Then, the answer: *You work for me. I am your Shepherd.*

That gave me clarity. I will follow other leaders, certainly. But only if they are leading in the same direction our Shepherd is going in.

The LORD is my Shepherd. The LORD is your shepherd. It's a call to you. Who else are you going to follow?

It's also a comfort. The **LORD** is your shepherd.

Remember what we learned about the capital-letter "LORD" in Bible translations. It stands for the unspoken name of the one true God:

the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen,
the Caller of Abraham and Sarah,
the Crafter of Israel;
the LORD is our Shepherd.

the Rescuer of slaves,
the Redeemer of captives
the Resurrection and the Life;
the LORD is our Shepherd.

God who is always with us,
God who never forsakes us,
God who loves us;
the LORD is our Shepherd.

The LORD . . . that is our Shepherd's person. Next week . . . our Shepherd's provision.

Amen? Yes, amen.

⁴ Ezekiel 34:7-15 (NIV).