

33. The Book of Psalms 23:1

The Great Shepherd-Part 1

a message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier

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This morning I want to draw your attention to Psalm 23. Psalm 23 is the best known and best loved of all the psalms.

The great Charles Haddon Spurgeon called it, "*The pearl of the psalms!*"

Even many unbelievers know and can recite this psalm—it has a universal appeal, "*a balm that soothes the soul of all those who hear it!*"

Psalm 23 is part of a trilogy of psalms known as the '*Shepherd Psalms*.'

- In Psalm 22, the theme is "*The Good Shepherd Who dies for the sheep.*" (John 10:11)
- In Psalm 23, the theme is "*The Great Shepherd Who lives and cares for the sheep.*" (Hebrews 13:20–21)
- In Psalm 24 we see Jesus presented as the "*Chief Shepherd*" Who is coming back someday to establish His Kingdom, reward His faithful servants and reign over the whole earth as King and Shepherd! (1 Peter 5:4)

So, to put it succinctly, in Psalm 22 we see the *cross*, in Psalm 23 the *crook* (the Shepherd's crook), and in Psalm 24 the *crown* (the King's crown).

Now as Christians living in 21st century America—much of the significance behind biblical illustrations, parables and even some of the language escapes us. That is because we are 2000 years removed and almost half a world apart from the cultural setting in which these things were spoken.

Even though the biblical writers spoke using simple everyday language that would have been very familiar to those having grown up in that ancient culture—we have difficulty connecting with some of these illustrations and metaphors.

For the most part these were simple people who lived in an agrarian culture—or in other words, they lived '*close to the earth*.'

Most of them were farmers, ranchers, fishermen and shepherds who drew much of what they wrote about from their everyday occupations and surroundings.

Whereas most of us living in 21st century America are '*city-slickers*' and as such we're totally unfamiliar with things like shepherding sheep, raising livestock, tending vineyards—and other things that were well-known to them.

We must therefore ‘transplant’ ourselves, if you will, into their cultural context and familiarize ourselves with their cultural surroundings if we are going to fully understand and assimilate everything that God wants us to understand in the pages of His Word—and that especially goes for Psalm 23!

Many commentators believe that David wrote this psalm later in life—no doubt drawing from his younger years as a shepherd watching over his father Jesse’s sheep.

But here David the shepherd, who became a king, is reflecting on—the King Who became a Shepherd! In Psalm 23 David is looking at the Lord as the Great Shepherd Who has faithfully led and cared for him throughout the years of his life.

And so here, David the shepherd reverses the roles and likens himself to a sheep!

Of course, David, having been a shepherd for many years, would have known well the characteristics of sheep and the shepherds who cared for them.

And it’s this relationship I’d like to focus in on and develop over the next few weeks as we study this beautiful and beloved psalm.

I’ve entitled this message—“**The Great Shepherd**” using Hebrews 13:20-21 as a background text:

Hebrews 13:20–21 (NKJV)

²⁰ Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, ²¹ make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen.

I. The Lord is My Shepherd—verse 1a

Let me start by saying that at almost every funeral I’ve ever been a part of—Psalm 23 has been incorporated into it in some way. And while this psalm has a universal *appeal* (almost all who have heard it, love it), it doesn’t have a universal *application*—because, unless a person can personalize the statement (as David did), “**The Lord is my Shepherd**”—he or she cannot claim the rest of the psalm as their own:

Psalm 23:1-6 (NKJV)

¹ The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. ³ He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. ⁴ Yea, 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. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

It is true that the Good Shepherd died for all, but only those who actually receive Him by a deliberate, willful act of faith are His sheep.

Ultimately, there are only 2 shepherds in the universe—the Lord Jesus Christ and Satan. Those of us who have given our lives to Jesus know full well Who our Shepherd is. But those who haven’t made Jesus their Lord, Savior and Shepherd—would vehemently deny that anyone *especially* Satan is controlling them—they firmly believe that *they* are in control of their life.

They don't realize that Satan is a subtle and secret shepherd who doesn't lead them directly (they're not Satanists), but rather leads and controls them through a variety of *'under-shepherds'* such as:

- *Money* (Jesus told us that money can be a master)
- *Power* (political world, corporate world or the underworld)
- *Prestige* (the pride of life)
- *Pleasure* (material, sexual)
- *Success*
- *Alcohol/drugs*
- *And also, through Satanic ideologies* (the cults, the occult, Marxism, Communism, Socialism, Wokeism—the list goes on and on)

All of these Satan will use in a person's life to manipulate, control and lead them—not into the *'green pastures'* of peace, purpose, and blessings as Jesus, the Good Shepherd, does for His sheep—but as an evil shepherd whose whole purpose in a person's life is to *'steal, kill and destroy'*—into a life of bondage, hopelessness, despair and ultimately eternal destruction in hell!

Those people who say, *"I'll never become a Christian because I want to control my own life"*—have been deceived by the devil into thinking they are *'free'* and in *'control'* when they have been taken captive by the devil to do his will—and they don't even realize it!

What people don't realize is that it isn't whether or not they have a shepherd—the real issue is what kind of shepherd do I have and where is that shepherd leading my life?

Bob Dylan (that great theologian) was right about one thing—*"You gotta serve somebody."* Actually, let me rephrase that—*"You're gonna serve somebody."*

Joshua put it this way—*"Choose this day who (not "if") you will serve...as for me and my house we will serve the Lord."*

The issue is not *if* I have a shepherd, the real issue is *what kind* of a shepherd do I have and where is he or she or it leading me?

Jesus is the only Good Shepherd who can lead you in life all the way into heaven—as David affirmed, *"He leads me in the right paths for His name's sake."* (Psalm 23:3)

Satan on the other hand, as the evil shepherd, leads people down the *wrong* path that leads to destruction—which shouldn't surprise us because in Revelation 9:11 we are told that 2 of the titles for the devil are *"Abaddon"* ('destruction') and *"Apollyon"* ('destroyer').

Author and one time shepherd Phillip Keller recalls an incident in his book, *"A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23"*—he writes:

"In memory I can still see one of the sheep ranches in our district which was operated by a tenant shepherd (a 'hireling'). He ought never to have been allowed to keep sheep. His sheep were always thin, weak and riddled with disease and parasites. Again and again, they would come and stand at the fence staring at the green, lush pastures which my flock enjoyed. Had they been able to speak, I am sure they would have said, 'O to be set free from this awful shepherd!' This is a picture which has never left my memory. It is a picture of pathetic people the

world over who have not known what it is to belong to the Good Shepherd who suffer instead under sin and Satan...How amazing that men and women vehemently refuse to accept Christ as their Shepherd, fearing that to acknowledge His ownership is to come under the rule of a tyrant.”

In light of this, **why would anyone not want Jesus** to lead their life? Jesus is such a Great Shepherd, so kind, caring and compassionate—which is reflected in one of my absolute favorite passages on the subject:

Isaiah 40:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry *them* in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young.

- This begs the question, *“Where are you going—where is your life being led and by whom—Jesus or the devil?”*
- *Can you say that you are moving closer to God or further away from Him?*
- *Is your life headed into greater confusion and chaos which is a sign you’re moving farther and farther from God?*
- *Or into a greater sense of peace, joy, and fulfillment which is the evidence you’re moving closer and closer to God?*

Whatever direction your life is headed will determine who your shepherd really is—the Good and Great Shepherd Who died for the sheep or the evil shepherd who wants to kill the sheep!?

David said, in almost a boastful way—**“The Lord is my Shepherd!”**

But, you really can’t say that unless you have accepted the Lord Jesus as your Savior (and Shepherd).

- *“How do I know if I’ve made Jesus my Savior and Shepherd?”*

Very simply, a shepherd is one who leads the sheep and the sheep *follow* him—are you following Jesus?:

John 10:27 (NKJV)

²⁷ My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.

Let me just say that everyone has a shepherd that is leading and controlling their life.

- *It might be some guru or spiritual leader that they look to for guidance.*
- *It might be a celebrity like a rock star or a movie star or an athletic super star.*
- *It might be a highly successful CEO like Elon Musk or a Jeff Bezos.*
- *It might be something like drugs or alcohol or a desire for wealth, power, success, pleasure etc.*

Isaiah 53:6 (NKJV)

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray...

People go astray because they have put their faith and trust in the wrong shepherd! One of the attributes of the devil is that he is a thief. Whereas the Good Shepherd gives life, abundance and blessings—Satan wants to rob you of life, abundance and blessings.

One of the things he steals from people (especially people who are following him farther and farther away from God) is—peace.

If there is one thing more than anything else the devil will steal (or try to steal) from us—is our peace. As the author of chaos and confusion he has filled this world, a world he is the god of, he has filled this world with the pressure to strive for happiness—all human beings want to be happy. Satan knows this—he knows it because he has been studying us for a long time.

In the Book of Job, Chapter one, God said to Lucifer, “*Have you considered my servant Job?*”.

Satan knows us only too well and knows at the core of our being (as human beings) resides, above all else a desire for happiness.

The Bible says that true happiness will only be found in a relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

But Satan counterfeits the path to God which alone can bring happiness—with the deceitfulness of riches and the cares of this life (1 John 2:15-16). Many have followed him down this road seeking to find happiness in life through more and more material things and earthly success—even though Jesus warned us about this when He said:

Luke 12:15 (NLT)

“Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.”

However, many don’t heed His warning and wind up falling into the devil’s trap. When they do, the result is emotional stress causing them to feel anxious, overwhelmed, and disillusioned that even though their life appears ‘good’—they often battle with a lingering sense that something deeper is still missing (like the Rich Young Ruler).

Well, something is missing—something that can’t be filled with drugs, alcohol, success, sexual encounters or material possessions. What they’re missing is a real, intimate relationship with the living God through His Son Jesus Christ. In other words, they’re trying to fill the God-shaped void in their soul with the junk of the world.

Now, let me say that a lack of peace is a *symptom* of something deeper—it isn’t the core problem but a symptom that is sounding the alarm to a much deeper problem.

When there is something wrong with our physical body, God has designed it to give off pain—which is the body’s alarm that there is a core problem, perhaps a disease of some kind that our body is alerting us to by giving off symptoms.

When our soul is ‘sick’ and crying out for God it sends signals also (restlessness, emptiness, depression)—signals we often miss or misdiagnose. In other words, we make the symptoms the core problem which causes us to run to the world for its ‘cures’ as we seek to remedy that inner pain and lack of peace with what the world has to offer.

These would include counseling with a secular psychologist, or psychologist, who often prescribes drugs to alleviate the pain—which often only makes it worse. The world offers a myriad of ‘cures’ for troubled souls—but only Jesus is the cure Who alone will satisfy the emptiness within and give you true and lasting peace—as He said:

John 14:27 (NKJV)

²⁷ Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

One Christian author said it well,

“The root issue is not external circumstances but internal disconnection from God’s sustaining peace. The world’s solutions—self-help strategies, temporary escapes (take a vacation or get drunk or high), or emotional control (hypnosis or ‘positive mental attitude’ courses)—are ultimately insufficient because they do not address the spiritual foundation of peace...

Peace is not something we manufacture; it is something we receive by living in the “finished work of Christ.” This idea reframes peace from being dependent on circumstances to being rooted in faith.

True peace doesn’t come from a calm life—it comes from a connected life,” even when life is chaotic, believers can experience a peace that “passes understanding”—a calm that transcends logic or emotion. Lasting peace is not found by avoiding hardship but by anchoring oneself in God during hardship. This involves trusting God’s sovereignty, surrendering control, and choosing faith over fear.”

In John Chapter 4, Jesus confronted a woman who was trying to find peace and fulfillment in life by ‘drinking’ from the wells of this world to solve the pain in her soul—

John 4:13 (NKJV)

¹³ Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again."

That is an extremely profound statement spoken by the One who made you and knows how you work and what will satisfy you, that should be written over every desire and ambition you have in life.

- What is it that you think will bring you satisfaction and happiness?
- What is it that you are pressing towards?
- What are the goals that you hope to achieve?
- What are you hoping to acquire thinking if you only had that—then you would be fully satisfied?

“O, if only I could have ‘this or that’ or ‘him or her’—I know I’d be happy, I know I wouldn’t want anything else.”

But listen, Jesus, the One who made you, is telling you that whatever it is, write over the top of it, *“Drink of this water but you will thirst again.”* Nothing this world has to offer in the way of material possessions, accomplishments, successes or even human relationships will ever satisfy that deep longing in your soul—only a relationship with Jesus Christ will satisfy you—and yet people still try.

There is always going to be the “when/then” person—*“when I get that—then I’ll be happy, then I will be satisfied.”* Jesus is telling us here that that is one of the biggest lies Satan has deceived us into believing—it’s what Paul the apostle called, *“the deceitfulness of riches.”* (Or as the rich man Rockefeller said—*“Just a little more.”*)

The Good and Great Shepherd is inviting you to come and follow Him. When you do, then the rest of Psalm 23 will become a reality in your life. We’ll start looking at the results of making Jesus your Shepherd next time as we continue looking at Psalm 23.

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Reach out to us [here](#).

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