

## The Shepherd God – Part 1

*“The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want.”* How many believers and unbelievers have a deep love for David’s most popular psalm? However, what is often lost on modern audiences is much of the deep symbolism and imagery which David used as a shepherd himself.

In our study of this psalm, we’ll see what it takes for sheep to lie down, what the shepherd does, and the meticulous care he takes for his sheep. If you struggle to believe that God loves you, studying **Psalm 23** will revive your soul. This two-part series takes an in-depth look at Psalm 23 to see our amazing Shepherd-God.

God loves the illustration of shepherd and the sheep. The Bible has at approximately 80 references to shepherds – sheep and lambs appear over 300 times. For some reason, God’s heart is especially attracted to the comparison of shepherd and sheep. As we get into it, perhaps we’ll see why. It has much to do with God’s diligent love for His people, and the human nature of His people.

By looking at Psalm 23 and related Scriptures, we want to see two things. In Part 1 of this series, we want to see the relationship, and in Part 2 we explore the results.

### The Relationship

So let’s begin. **Psalm 23:1** says, *“The LORD is my Shepherd.”* This is the relationship. First we see:

#### 1. The identity of the shepherd

David, a keeper of sheep, looks up, and says – but the Lord is *my* Shepherd. I look after these defenceless animals, but I myself am a defenceless creature, who also needs a shepherd. Who is David’s Shepherd? His earthly father, Jesse? King Saul? The prophet Samuel? No, David states clearly the identity of the Shepherd – the LORD. Yahweh is my Shepherd, says David – that’s His name. The Creator-God Himself is my Shepherd.

Now consider that God, who inspired Scripture, delights to compare Himself with a shepherd. In Scripture, He calls Himself the Great Shepherd, the Good Shepherd and the Chief Shepherd. **Hebrews 13:20** says the Lord Jesus is *“that great shepherd of the sheep.”*

Why is He the Great Shepherd? Here we mean great in the sense of power, authority, Lordship. Christ is the Great Shepherd because His power of shepherding goes way beyond a few humans here and there. Listen to Isaiah:

*Lift up your eyes on high, and behold Who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: He calleth them all by names by the greatness of His might, for that He is strong in power; not one faileth.*

**Isaiah 40:26**

Isaiah tells us to look up at the stars, and says, God brings them out – He leads them in their courses. He is the Shepherd of the Stars. He calls them all by names, says Isaiah. Our strongest telescopes cannot even see all the stars in the universe, let alone name all of them. This is the Greatness of our Shepherd.

His lowliness in comparing Himself to a shepherd magnifies His true greatness, which is unmatched. As the previous verse says, *“To whom then will ye liken Me, or shall I be equal?” saith the Holy One.* This Person, says David, is my Shepherd. He who directs the ordinances of the largest objects on the universe – stars – this One is looking after my life.

He’s also the Good Shepherd. Greatness without goodness can be terrifying. But the matchless truth of the universe is that the Great God – the Creator God – is not only all-powerful, but infinitely good. He takes holy pleasure in the joy of His creatures. No, He is the Good Shepherd. We find Jesus calling Himself this in **John 10**:

*The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. I am the Good Shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.*

**John 10:10-11**

People are sheep in their natures; we’ll see that in a moment. The fact is – people are following something or someone. They are going after something they believe will bring them happiness and joy. Jesus says the false shepherd, the hirelings – representatives of Satan, false teachers and even sin itself – lead people astray. They have no heart for the sheep, no true desire to see the sheep satisfied and healthy. They are self-protective.

In contrast, Christ says, the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. While Satan and even men seek to exploit the sheep, Christ gave Himself on the cross of Calvary for the salvation of the sheep. He gave up His own life that we, through His death and resurrection, might live.

Now think about that. A human is far above a sheep in terms of value and intelligence and ability. Why would a human shepherd give up his precious life for a sheep? Well, if that seems incongruous to you, ask yourself why God Himself, infinitely of more value than all His creation out together, would die for human beings? But He did. The Good Shepherd gave His very life for the sheep.

In verse 13 to 14, He explains further: *“The hireling fleeth, because he is a hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.”* False teachers, Satan and selfish humans do not care for the sheep. They have no value for them personally – they are to be used and destroyed to them.

In contrast, Christ says – I know my sheep, and am known of mine. God does not operate impersonally with His children – He knows us. How well does He know us? Verse 3 says, *“To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out.”* He knows us individually.

Shepherds frequently name each one in their flocks. Christ knows us not by a number, not by a vague acquaintance with our face – but by name. He is personally interested in us, and loves us. Verse 10 drives the point home: *“The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”* Whereas others selfishly hurt the sheep, Christ says He comes to give them abundant life.

Isn't it amazing how little we trust Him? He assures us He is a Good Shepherd, directing us to the best pastures, for our overall good – that we might have abundant life, and fullness of joy. Yet we look over the fence, at the dusty, dry pastures of Satan's domain, and even seek to go there and graze with the poor sheep of his pasture. David says – this One, this kind-hearted, sacrificial, caring Good Shepherd – is my shepherd.

He's also the Chief Shepherd. This is used in the context of Peter speaking to the pastors. He says in **1 Peter 5:2-4**: *“Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.”*

Shepherds would sometimes set up a camp. Individual shepherds would go out from the camp with their flocks. A chief shepherd would stay at the camp. All other shepherds reported to him, and often brought sick sheep back to him, to be nursed back to health. No matter how faulty human spiritual leadership may be – there is a Chief Shepherd.

Men who are pastors are sheep themselves – full of problems, personality flaws, weaknesses and inabilities. Sometimes they are slothful or selfish and neglect the sheep through their own sinfulness. Sometimes it is an oversight, an inevitable failing of fallible human beings. Whatever happens, we can take courage – there is a Chief.

Wicked shepherds will have to give an account to the Chief Shepherd, and furthermore, the Chief Shepherd will not permit his sheep to be neglected for too long.

*Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock. The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them.*

**Ezekiel 34:2-4**

Then, a few verses later, the Chief Shepherd states his intentions: *“I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord GOD. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick” (Ezekiel 34:15-16)*. If you've ever been spiritually abused by someone in spiritual authority – take courage – the Chief Shepherd ultimately loves you and seeks your joy.

Isn't it something that God has chosen to identify Himself so strongly with being a shepherd? Consider – a shepherd was one of the lowest vocations in Israel – but God delights to compare Himself to such a humiliating vocation. It was a job given to the youngest son, as we see with David. It was a dirty, humbling life – a poor man's job, one not fitting for nobility or kings. But the King of Kings, in His amazing humility, calls Himself the Good Shepherd, the Chief Shepherd and the Great Shepherd.

It was also a lonely life. Shepherds spent the large majority of their time alone, leading, defending and tending for the sheep. It was a life cut off from the everyday social bustle of the town. Was not Christ a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief? He knew acute loneliness – being in the world, and His own receiving Him not; His own family disbelieving His claims; and finally, God the Father forsaking Him on the cross. All this He willingly endured – to be our Shepherd.

A shepherd's life was also a labouring life. It was not a lazy life – it was strenuous, hard work. Sheep require a lot of attention. You lose sleep, you battle predators, you have to walk up the mountains, spy out the best land, brave the heat and the cold. It's a laborious life.

God does not sleep or slumber in His attentiveness toward His Sheep. God cannot get tired, but we can say that God is very diligent towards His sheep. You and I are not an afterthought, a side-issue or a distraction. God is mindful of us, and is very diligent to work for our abundant life. God identifies Himself with this kind of care.

It goes without saying that a shepherd is also a loving life. Good Shepherds, at least, have a real fondness for the sheep. They name them, they often carry them in their arms, they will even pet them. They talk to their sheep affectionately, and regard each one with care and love. God does not call Himself a cattle-herder. Cattle herders drive their cattle, and leave them to themselves. Shepherds diligently look after their sheep individually – providing, defending, rescuing, guiding and caring.

David is awesomely privileged to be able to say – this One, the Great Shepherd, the Chief Shepherd, the Good Shepherd – is *my* Shepherd.

## **2. The Identity of the sheep**

Notice secondly, the identity of the sheep. David says – the Lord is *my* shepherd. In other words, David compares himself to a sheep. David – the shepherd boy, who knew the nature of sheep better than anyone else, considers it a fair comparison to call himself a sheep. In fact, over and over, Scripture likens people to sheep. Why? Why should I look at sheep and say – there is a good picture of human nature?

Well, primarily because sheep require shepherds. Sheep need constant care. God created them to need the care and attention of a human. That is the heart of what God wants to get across to us – He made humans to need the care and attention of God. Sheep are truly helpless. How so?

**Firstly, they are defenceless.** Sheep do not have sharp teeth, sharp claws or a loud growl to defend themselves with. They are pathetically weak in the face of an attack. They are not fast runners. They can never outrun the predators that prey on them. If they fall over, they struggle to get up again. Indeed, a sheep that lies down too far can lose its balance and end up on its back, unable to get up except for assistance.

We truly are defenceless against the perils of this life. Though some think they are strong and enjoy barking at Satan, pretending they have bound or rebuked him, the truth is – sheep don't scare a roaring lion. Ever see a bleating sheep frighten a roaring lion? The roaring lion of Satan is scared off only by the power and presence of the Great Shepherd. He defends us. He delivers us from the Evil One, and from many of life's calamities and tragedies.

**Secondly, sheep are prone to wander.** Isaiah 53 tells us all we like sheep have gone astray. Sheep tend to get off the path of safety, off the pastures, and find themselves in sticky situations. They end up on cliff edges, on steep ravines from which they can't return. They tend to roam. Does this sound familiar?

Human beings, by their own choices, often trap themselves. Humans believe lies, and follow teachings and promises that hold no lasting joy – and soon they end up in a corner, in trouble, and tragically, even in self-destruction. See, sheep are like humans. When sheep go off the beaten track – they are not *trying* to harm themselves. They, in their dullness, think this path will be best. But it is not – and only a shepherd that knows best.

The shepherd sees more, knows more, understands the dangers, and is capable of warning and pulling back an erring sheep. Humans go after sin, not because they think it will harm them, but because they think it will be good. We need to trust the voice of the Good Shepherd who knows more and sees the dangers.

**Third, sheep tend to follow each other.** Shepherds will tell you that often their problems centre on one wayward sheep that is fence-crawling, or wandering off. That one sheep causes others to follow it. Sheep have a real mob instinct – they bolt if the others bolt, relax if the others relax, and follow each other. It requires a watchful shepherd to prevent sheep from leading each other into destruction.

How true this is of humans. Humans are, more often than not, following another human. We believe the teachings, the advice, the example, the way of life of other humans, and follow them blindly, believing they know the way to greener grass. We seek to fit in with others, and to be pretty much part of the group – we don't like to stand out too much – and if not careful, we allow our culture and our world to shape us.

**Sheep are also, frankly, pretty stupid.** Now, God never insults us, but He has chosen to compare us to a fairly dense animal. He did not compare us to a dolphin, to a cat, to a fox. He compares us to a rather dumb animal. Not to shame us, but so we realise that we are not as wise as we think we are.

See, it doesn't matter how intelligent you are, if you lack wisdom – and that's what the comparison emphasises. Sheep are not wise animals – they follow each other, they do their own thing – they are perpetually faced with destroying themselves apart from the tireless, diligent attention of the shepherd. And this is what God wants to emphasise to us.

Sheep need constant attention and care. They are helpless, they are defenceless, they are prone to wander and get themselves in sticky situations, they are tormented by parasites and insects – it is as if God specifically made them as an example of how much humans need God. Sheep apart from human shepherds do not do well. Humans apart from the Good Shepherd don't do well either.

So David identifies the Shepherd – Yahweh Himself, the Good, Great and Chief Shepherd. He then identifies the sheep – himself. He places himself in the category of a sheep – one of the animal kingdom's most helpless animals – needing a shepherd. But then, notice thirdly:

### **3. Identification with the Shepherd**

David says, the Lord is my shepherd. He is not simply *the* Shepherd. He is *my* shepherd. He states the relationship in the clearest terms by identifying Himself with this Shepherd. How did David come into such a relationship?

Well, consider that sheep don't go looking for a shepherd. It is the shepherd who goes looking for the sheep. Christ's parable of the shepherd leaving the 99 to find the one shows it is God who goes looking for sinners. Christ's statement of His own mission is found in **Luke 19:10** – *"The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."*

What did He do to bring us wandering sheep into His pasture? He tells us in **John 10:27-28**: *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand."* He gave eternal life to the Sheep so that they might be part of His flock.

How did He provide eternal life? By bearing their death in His body on the cross – the just punishment for their sins – and imparting His righteousness and eternal life through His resurrection.

*Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by Whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.*

**1 Peter 2:24-25**

But something needs to be added. David willingly takes Christ as His Shepherd. Being part of His flock is not automatic. Christ has paid the price so that you can be saved, so that you can come under His kind management and care. But Christ said to some people in **John 10:26**: *"But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you."*

Unbelievers are not part of the flock. You become part of the flock by willingly trusting Christ to be your shepherd. He becomes the source of your salvation, the one who cleans you up and gives you a new reason to live. It is He who forgives your sin and soothes your conscience. But this we must do in an act of faith; by realising we have been wandering sheep, trying to live life our own way.

We must confess we have sinned against Him – violated our own design instructions, and sought to be self-directing sheep. We repent and come to Him for forgiveness, and new management. We come under His authority – we want Him to direct our lives, satisfy our souls. We recognise His right over us, respond to His authority and acknowledge His ownership.

Many people say, 'the Lord is my Shepherd', but they have never called upon His name to save them from their sins, and they have never submitted themselves to His direction and leading. The health and state of a sheep is basically dependent upon what kind of shepherd it has. Who is your shepherd?

If you have never received Christ as Lord and Saviour, then according to Christ, your shepherd is Satan. What a miserable lot in life – to be led by a shepherd devoted to your destruction. But if you have, then we need to rejoice in the kind and wonderful Master we have – the Good, Great, Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The Lord – is my Shepherd. That's the relationship. In Part 2 of this series, we look at the results of this relationship.