

Psalm 23

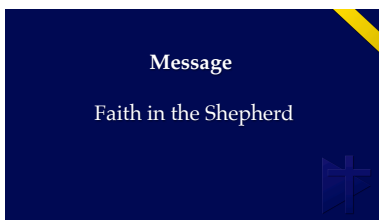
¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
³ He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

John 10:11-18

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. 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. 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. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

Introduction:



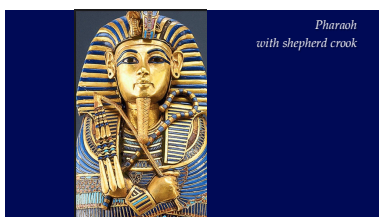
In the world of the Bible sheep and shepherds captured people’s imagination. Both sheep and people are social animals. We both need to live in groups.



What is curious is that both sheep and people live together and have experience of each other. This is especially so if the land is dry and sheep need shepherds to be led to places where fresh grazing and water may be found.

After thousands of years of close contact the human societies of the ancient world saw themselves as being a bit like sheep. Sheep provided a reflection of humanity.

- We both need to be in safe family groups.
- We are both vulnerable to attacking animals such as wolves.
- We both benefit from wise caring leadership.
- If circumstances get complicated or critical we both need help getting what they need in food, water and shelter.



That identification and shared nature was not just reflected in the Bible among the Hebrews. The Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt saw themselves as shepherds to their people. The people were their flock and they were the providing protector and leader.

Since the ancient world people have built more fences, trained dogs, invented steel wire and use motorbikes. Sheep rearing became industrialized. In our world few people are happy considering

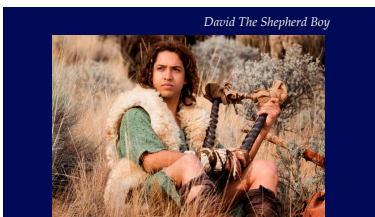
themselves to be a sheep. Today people consider sheep dumb and powerless which is not how modern people want to think of themselves. Modern people in the West prefer to be independent both of close community or herd mentality and from any obvious shepherd role, unless it's desperate such as in time of war.

Westerners simply don't like the sheep connection anymore.

We are temperamentally more like cats, less social and certainly not keen on being interdependent within the flock. Then some of us come from countries where sheep are not common. Tropical Asia is not sheep country. So when we hear Jesus speaking to us about himself as the Good Shepherd we may have some difficulties. It's not an image that we warm to.

Text:

So with this in mind I'd like to open up one of the best known portions of scripture and link it to the words of Jesus through a very personal experience. It's the experience of David the youngest son of Jesse.



There is strong tradition that David wrote Psalm 23. I am going to say that it may well express something we could do well to own for ourselves.

When the prophet Samuel asked Jesse about his sons he did not consider presenting his youngest son David. He was out doing the job that had been assigned to him - looking after the family sheep.

David may have been kept at a distance because he was a bit of a family embarrassment. Why? Well he was Jesse's son but there is a hint that he may not have been well born. He may have been 'illegitimate' for some reason, so he was kept at a distance, out of the way.

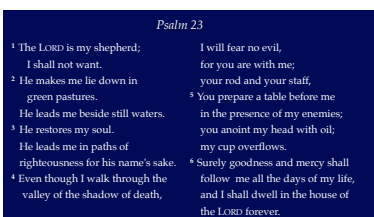
If this was the case young David lived more with sheep than people. He may well have felt the sense of being put away and some shame around that.

But there was something in this lad that would not be put down. He knew about the Lord God of Israel and he knew about sheep and had a poet's heart. This all came together in a psalm.

Q: So what did he do in his psalm?

A: He imagined himself as a sheep in the Lord God's flock talking to other sheep and he owned and celebrated the LORD as His shepherd

Through this Psalm he declared that in his needs, his wounds, his uncertainties and griefs, he looked to his shepherd the Lord God of Israel. This is where he placed his active faith.



So let's read this Psalm as a boy who has been made to feel shame and does not expect much from his family.

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

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I think the psalm fits David's early experience well. He looks to God Almighty as his shepherd and to dwell in God's house forever as an honoured guest, even in front of those who despised him.

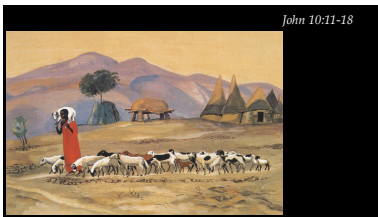
David knew what a good shepherd was and applied that boldly to frame his faith in God. Being a sheep in God's flock is the best and that is what I look to and claim for myself! The LORD is *my* shepherd.

There may even be some light polemic for others in this as he implies that there are various other shepherds on offer but as a satisfied sheep, he choose for the LORD. He is *the* best and here is why.

I can hear a parallel to Joshua's challenge to Israel: Choose this day whom you will serve but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.¹

We are all like sheep so choose your shepherd people. I have chosen the LORD! He is the best.

Jesus



Nine hundred years later Jesus speaks into all that consciousness and declares himself to be 'The Good Shepherd'. We heard this from the John 10 gospel reading today.

There are other shepherds but they are not worthy of the trust and love of the sheep. They are not good.

Jesus defines the 'Good Shepherd' in one phrase: 'They lay down their life for the sheep.' He also says 'I know my sheep and they know me.'

Jesus says the Father loves him for doing this. Jesus is the assigned Good Shepherd of God's flock. He fulfills the attributes that young David was inspired to celebrate in his Psalm.

Application:

I want to make a cultural comment and then a personal application.

Cultural Comment

In March this year, 4 sheep were killed by a wolf in Limburg, south of here. This was confirmed by DNA analysis of the bite marks.² That is the animal story. The human story is that because the wolf is a protected species the shepherd is not allowed to attack or shoot them even in defense of his sheep. To compensate for this the provincial government pays compensation to the shepherd for any sheep proven to be lost to wolves, hence the DNA test.

¹ Joshua 24:15 Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

² <https://www.1limburg.nl/wolf-blijkt-grote-boosdoener-bij-doodgebeten-schapen>

That is an unusual local sheep story. It means that it is illegal to be a good shepherd in Limburg if not the Netherlands. If you raise sheep you are required to be a bad shepherd by the standard of Jesus and David. I thought that was worth considering. How much our mindset has changed in different times!

How might a sheep in a Limburg feel? Is this good shepherding?

I think it reflects the sort of compromise or wider corruption people know about in Jesus' world. That is why he claimed to be The Good Shepherd and not another self-serving run-at-the-first-sign-of-trouble sort of shepherd. The bad shepherd handed in the remaining ears and bits of a devoured sheep to the owner while a good shepherd would lay down his life to protect and defend.

Personal Application

What struck me in David's Psalm was the passion and boldness with which he owned the LORD as his shepherd. He celebrated being God's sheep under the care of the LORD.

That is so simple and so strong. This is David's Faith. This is what he was singing to his sheep as life opened before him. This is what he declared amidst the dangers and uncertainties in the context of his family's shameful secrets.

The LORD is *my* shepherd.

The LORD is my *good* shepherd.

In all circumstances I will trust in *him*.

Resolving that brings peace and rest.

My existence and my significance is all linked to my shepherd, my very good shepherd so I can live in that settled faith.

Q: But what if, things go wrong; what if some of my cells start to misbehave or my heart gives up?
What if I loose my livelihood or those dear to me?

A: No change of shepherd will be considered.

The Lord Jesus Christ is my permanent shepherd, not a coach for a football team for a season or two.

The reality of that foundational faith often only comes clear in deep crisis.

Deep crisis has the ability to sift faith in a good shepherd. That is the silver lining in crisis.

Most people seek hope and hang on to that.

I have seen that often when praying with very ill people. They want to hope in God even when all the signs are against them. True Christian hope is in what God will complete in Christ. It rests on what God has begun in the Resurrection of Christ. Christian Hope about sharing in what God has pioneered in Jesus. It's not that alongside the doctor's efforts God might add something to save.

Prayer is good.

Hope is good.

Faith is the goal.

But what David and Jesus are about is owning and trusting God as good no matter what. That's faith and something beyond hope.

Jesus invites that faith from all who would give it by promising, "I lay my life down for my sheep." thus worthy of your faith.

This commitment is Jesus' level of faith on our behalf and for us.

I want to suggest that for us it begins with trusting Jesus in what he says and owning him as our good shepherd to then live out of that.

We can then daily celebrate Jesus looking over us and caring for us in the course of life.

For those who were here last week, this was in what Arul witnessed to when his manager asked for a response to his pending redundancy. The Lord will provide even if you will not. He could have been saying: The LORD is my shepherd, Philips is not.

In this church we could do well to grow that faith. The risen and ascended Lord Jesus is our shepherd. In that faith we can face what comes. We can move beyond hope to step out in faith knowing the Lord is on our case, even when we fall into a deep hole or are threatened by a wolf.

It's up to us as individuals, one sheep at a time.

I would suggest that after confessing Jesus as LORD, the next line be; and, he is my shepherd.

Final Comment:

A take away: If you have trouble sleeping: don't count sheep, talk to the shepherd.