

## Shepherd

Psalm 23:1-3a, “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.”

**Question:** If the Lord is my shepherd, what is my obligation to those I lead and feed?

**Key Verses:** Num 27:17; Jer 23:1-5; 1 Pet 2:25.

### The Lord as Shepherd

Next to John 3:16, Psalm 23 is likely the most well-known passage of the Bible. It is read at almost every funeral. It has a mystical power to comfort in the midst of life’s greatest tragedies. There is something in the imagery of God watching over us—leading, feeding, guiding, providing—that refreshes the soul. It is almost as if the words of this poem breathe breath into a weary breast. It embraces the mourner, welcomes the vagabond, soothes the broken, and casts a ray of hope on the outcast. The portrait of a pasture and peaceful waters has a natural gravitational pull.

“The Lord is my Shepherd” is one of King David’s most famous songs. He is, however, a solitary voice. For example, long before David, Jacob (aka Israel) stated on his deathbed, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day...” (Gen 48:15; see also Gen 49:24; Num 27:17). This echo is heard as far back as Abel (Gen 4:4) and reverberates through the Psalms and prophets (Psalm 28:9; 78:52; 79:13; 80:1; 95:7; 107:41; Eccl 12:11; Isaiah 40:11; Jer 31:10; Eze 34:15; Zech 9:16). Some of this poetry is as matchless as Psalm 23. “For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care” (Psalm 95:7). “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart” (Isaiah 40:11). These descriptions of a caring, loving God bring comfort to his people. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, even under the discipline of his rod, even in the presence of our enemies we sense that God is up to good.

### Leaders as Shepherds

When God delegates his authority to kings, priests, and prophets, he expects them to lead like shepherds. For Yahweh, “shepherd” is no merely metaphor; it is a method. It is the divinely authorized way of managing authority. Our power is for protection. Our rod and staff are for guidance. Our sacrifice is the shepherd for the sheep not of the sheep for the shepherd. This is most obvious in the life of David, the great shepherd king who penned this Psalm. Interestingly, when David first stepped into the national spotlight it was as a shepherd facing a giant warrior. He came from the flocks to the battle front (1 Sam 17:15, 20). His military prowess came from his pastoral duties of warding off lions and bears (1 Sam 17:34). And his armament was the shepherd’s accoutrements: staff, pouch, and sling (1 Sam 17:40).

It turns out that David's time in the field was his best preparation for the throne. "He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them" (Psalm 78:70–72). (See also 2 Sam 5:2; 7:8; 1 Chron 11:2; 17:6-7; Psalm 78:70-72). The same could be said of Moses (Exod 3:1; Psalm 77:20; Isa 63:11). It was his forty years in the wilderness with Jethro's flocks that prepared him for his forty years of leading Israel through the desert. Before Moses was Abraham (Gen 13:5). He was famed for the size of his flocks. He passed on the family business to Isaac who passed it on to Jacob (Gen 29-31) who married a shepherdess named Rebecca (Gen 29:9). By the time the family emigrated to Egypt before becoming a nation, they were known for animal husbandry and actually granted lands in Goshen for that reason (Gen 46:32-34; Exod 12:32; Num 14:33).

Because the heroes of Israel's past were literal shepherds, leaders throughout her history were compared metaphorically to shepherds. This was true for kings, priests, governors, and prophets (Jer 17:16; Amos 1:1; 7:14-15). Even the pagan ruler Cyrus, who rescued Israel, was affectionately afforded the title Shepherd (Isa 44:28).

### **Bad Shepherds**

The honor afforded metaphorical shepherds (leaders) is interesting given the fact that the actual occupation was one of the most despised. For example, when Israel emigrated to Egypt to survive the famine, Joseph took care to isolate them in Goshen. They needed space to separate them from the nationals or their occupations would isolate them from them. Hear his counsel to his brothers in Genesis 46:34, "You should answer, 'Your servants have tended livestock from our boyhood on, just as our fathers did.' Then you will be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians." It was pretty clear that shepherds were on the lower rungs of the social totem pole.

Because shepherds had to move constantly through others' lands and fields, they had a reputation of being thieves. Anything that went missing could be blamed on itinerant shepherds. Because they were strangers (and lonely) they caught sexual liaisons where they could. Anonymity has never bolstered morality. As an occupational hazard, shepherds were physically dirty. More than that, they were ritually unclean since they constantly slaughtered animals, breaded sheep, and delivered lambs. All told, they lived on the edges of communities and the lower rungs of society.

Paradoxically, every mention of actual shepherds is ignoble while every metaphorical mention of God's shepherds is illustrious. In other words, the literal shepherds were the dregs of society. The spiritual shepherds were superlative characters. This paradoxical use of shepherds did create space for a pointed critique of spiritual shepherds gone bad. Those leaders that did not live up to God's standards got a pretty brusque beating in the Bible. For example, Jeremiah (not known for soft-pedaling his critique) said, "'Woe to the shepherds who

are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!’ declares the LORD. Therefore, this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: ‘Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,’ declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 23:1–2). Similar censures are found in Isaiah 56:11; Joel 2:8; Jeremiah 10:21; 12:10; 25:34–36; 50:6; Ezekiel 34:1–10; Zechariah 10:3; 11:1–17; and Jude 1:12). The most famous of these is Ezekiel 34. It is a full-throttle frontal assault on the rulers of Israel that had used their influence to fleece the flock rather than feed them: “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 the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally” (Ezek 34:3–4).

### **The Good Shepherd**

The problem of poor leaders was pandemic. This led to a longing for a return of David the Shepherd/King who cared for God’s flock. A number of prophets embedded this hope in a Messianic prediction. “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd” (Ezekiel 34:23). From his birth in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2–4, cited in Matt 2:6) to his death in Jerusalem (Zech 13:7, cited in Matt 26:31, Mark 14:27, John 16:32), Jesus’ leadership was modeled after “the Lord is my Shepherd”. The lineage is clear: God leads like a shepherd. His delegates, therefore, must follow suit. Since they failed they were terminated and an ultimate messianic Shepherd was promised.

None of this was missed by Jesus. His claims to be a Shepherd align with Jewish tradition and expectation. In that context, his claims were aggressive and undoubtedly offensive to many. Case in point, he claims judgment between sheep and goats (Matt 25:32). In John 10:1–18, Jesus critiques the false shepherds in the tradition of Jeremiah 23, Ezekiel 34, and Zechariah 11. There’s really nothing new here nor anything less offensive than it had been in the past. This metaphor alone could account for his execution in Jerusalem where the presumed shepherds held their rod and staff. Consider the simple statement Jesus made about “Sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36/Mark 6:34). Most people read that in isolation from the Old Testament. It is a direct quote from Moses (Numbers 27:17) when he commissioned Joshua as his successor. Joshua was to lead Israel into the Promised Land. This metaphor echoed across the pages of the OT when Israel was scattered due to lack of a leader (1 Kings 22:17//2 Chron 18:16; Eze 34:5; Zech 10:2). For Jesus to take Moses’ words and apply them to himself was an obvious claim to national influence. It was an even more obvious connection to his fellow citizens since his name *Jesus* in Hebrew is *Joshua*. He was clearly well aware of the trajectory of this title and the claim he was making.

This incomparable claim of Jesus was marked by three different New Testament Authors. “Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:20). “For ‘you were

like sheep going astray,’ but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25). “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:17). By the end of the Bible, the Shepherd of Psalm 23 has a new name, a new face, and new mailing address. Yahweh embodies Jesus and abides among us to lay down his life for the sheep. That’s just what good shepherds do.

In fact, in an extraordinary twist, the Good Shepherd IS the Lamb of God. His sacrifice at Passover permanently replaced the temple system with a whole new sacrifice. Just as the firstborn of the flock belonged to the Lord as a replacement for the firstborn son, so Jesus is the replacement for all our mortal sins. The perfect sacrifice of Passover is thus represented by Jesus. As it turns out the shepherd became the lamb! That shift is not a new message in the New Testament. No, it was embedded in the Psalms. Psalm 23, the song of the Shepherd, is preceded by Psalm 22, the song of the Lamb—the clearest description of Calvary outside the gospels. Leadership could never again be what you get from the sheep but what you sacrifice for the sheep.

Consequently, any Christian leader who picks up the staff also accepts the rod of the suffering servant. Apostles and Pastors (Eph 4:11), Elders and Evangelists (Acts 20:28-29; 1 Peter 5:2-3), have the great privilege to lead and feed the sheep but only if they are willing to lay down their lives for the sheep. Just as Jesus represents Yahweh, so we represent kings and priests of the past. Either we will wear the title well, with humility and sacrifice, or we will repeat the cycle of the past and suffer similar consequence. Shepherding is noble only when we suffer. It is shameful when we fleece the flock. This is a theological twist that is inalienable and incomprehensible to any who do not know the Good Shepherd, our God who suffers on our behalf.

**Key Points:**

- The primary metaphor for God as leader is Shepherd. His model was to be followed by any who ruled on his behalf.
- The rampant disregard for sheep by leaders led to a longing for a better shepherd that was predicted in the Messiah.
- Church leaders—Apostles, Elders, and Evangelists—take up the mantle of Shepherds in a long line of Jewish tradition.

**Action Step:** Identify two practices of shepherding you could implement in one of these areas: (a) raising your kids; (b) leading a team at work; (c) leading a volunteer team at church; (d) coaching a kids’ sports team.

**Further Resources:** Phillip Keller, [\*A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23\*](#) (Keller, 1970).