

INTRODUCTION: THE PSALM

The 23rd Psalm. We read it in our times of loss. We quote it for comfort in difficult times. We inscribe it on plaques to hang on the walls of our homes. As author Max Lucado states:

"Do more beloved words exist? Framed and hung in hospital rooms, scratched on prison walls, quoted by the young, and whispered by the dying. In these lines, sailors have found a harbor, the frightened have found a father, and strugglers have found a friend."

Max Lucado But could it be that the amazing spiritual legacy contained in this psalm is sometimes overlooked because of our familiarity with it? Do we really understand that in this Psalm alone, we have all we need to live successfully in this world and to be prepared for the one to come?

The purpose of this study is to take an in-depth look at one of the most beloved portions of scripture of all times--the 23rd Psalm--to mine spiritual riches from every phrase and word, seeking for understanding as one would search for hidden treasure:

My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you, So that you incline your ear to wisdom, And apply your heart to understanding; Yes, if you cry out for discernment, And lift up your voice for understanding, If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will understand the fear of the Lord, And find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding. (Proverbs 2:1-6, NKJV)

Psalm 23 is part of a sequence of psalms that explores the symbolism of the Lord as the Shepherd of His people. Psalms chapters 22-24 are often referred to as the "shepherd psalms".

-In Psalm 22, God is portrayed as the Good Shepherd. The chapter is a prophecy foretelling the death of the Lord Jesus Christ for the sins of mankind.

-In Psalm 23, the subject of this study, He is portrayed as the Great Shepherd who seeks lost sheep and brings them into His flock.

-In Psalm 24, the Lord is the Chief Shepherd who is portrayed as coming in power and glory as King of Kings.

Most Bible scholars conclude that Psalm 23 was written by David when he was a young man serving his father, Jesse, as a shepherd. In these six verses, David shares a spiritual analogy of the Lord as a Shepherd and His people as sheep, drawing from the extensive knowledge and experience which he gained as a shepherd. As a good shepherd, David knew his sheep by name, his sheep knew his voice, and they followed him. David knew that a good shepherd never leaves his sheep alone and that he searches for lost sheep to restore them to the flock. The shepherd provides for their needs and protects them from predators (1 Samuel 17:34- 35).

Jacob was actually the first person in the Bible to use the shepherd metaphor for God (Genesis 48:15). From that time on, the Holy Spirit repeatedly uses the image of a shepherd as exemplified by this prophetic word about the coming Messiah: He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young. (Isaiah 40:11, KJV)

Jesus identified Himself as that Shepherd (John 10:11-16). He is also called the Great Shepherd (Hebrews 13:20) and the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). We need a shepherd because we easily become lost. Like sheep in the natural world, we have a herd instinct to follow the crowd. Isaiah says that we all, like sheep, have gone astray and turned to our own sinful ways (Isaiah 53:6). Jesus warned:

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14, NKJV)

Wide is the gate for the untamed herds of this world. Narrow is the pathway traveled by the Shepherd and His sheep. There is only one Shepherd and one door to His fold (John 10:1-2). This is why we must follow in the footsteps of the Shepherd and His flock (Song of Solomon 1:7). You are about to begin an awesome spiritual journey doing just that! If you do not know the Lord as your Shepherd, you will be given the opportunity to become part of His fold. In fact-- He is already seeking for you right now:

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that

is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (Matthew 18:12-14, NKJV)

If you do not know the Lord as your personal Savior, the Good Shepherd wants you to join His flock. If you already know the Lord as your Shepherd, then this study explains the rich spiritual legacy provided for you as recorded in Psalm 23. The goal of this study is not information, but revelation. Its purpose is to enable you to come to know the Good Shepherd and become intimately acquainted with Him.

It is time to begin our spiritual trek. The Shepherd has provided everything you need for the journey. You need no map or directions, for He will lead the way. So let's begin.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PERSON: HE IS MY SHEPHERD

The first phrase of this Psalm is "the Lord is my shepherd". Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David makes a declaration--a thesis statement as it were--and then spends the rest of the Psalm proving it. Let's examine this opening verse word-by-word.

The. He is not just any Shepherd. He is the Shepherd. All roads do not lead to God. Jesus said: "...Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7). There is one door to the sheep fold, and it is Jesus Christ. He is THE one way to God: Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

Lord. This Hebrew term is translated 6,800 times in the Old Testament. It is the special, unique name for God. It is not a title--such as is given to the lords and ladies of England. It is God's name as revealed to Moses: Then Moses said to God, "Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:13-14, NKJV)

In essence, God was saying to Moses, "This is my name. I want you to know it so you can call me by it because I want to have a personal relationship with you!" That name is "I Am". Fill in the blanks after "I Am" with whatever you need, because He is whatever you need Him to be in your life.

As your Shepherd, He is the Lord of your life. In Scripture, the word "Lord" is the Hebrew name "Jehovah". It is the personal name for God that distinguishes Him from false gods. Our Shepherd is not just any Lord, He is The Lord. The name "Lord" also implies His sovereignty. Before He can be your Shepherd, He must become your Lord. That is the prerequisite for claiming the amazing promises of Psalm 23.

Is. The word "is" in the active present tense confirms that He is today and shall be in the future your Shepherd. Just as He is David's Shepherd, He also IS your Shepherd. There is no "if" or "but", no "I hope He is." He simply is.

My. It is one thing to say “The Lord is the Shepherd” and another to say, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” David used the personal pronoun "my." He did not say "the Lord is the Shepherd of the world in general." He declared: "The Lord is a Shepherd to me. He cares for me. He watches over me". It is personal.

Shepherd. Of all the many names of the Lord that David could have used in this Psalm, he was led of the Spirit to use the Hebrew name “Jehovah-Rohi” which means “The Lord My Shepherd”. Why? Because the image of a shepherd tenderly leading, feeding, and caring for his sheep is a perfect picture of our Savior’s relationship to His people. The word most commonly used for “shepherd” is ra’ah, which is also the Hebrew word for “best friend.” The translation of the word in this Psalm includes both meanings. The Lord Jesus Christ is your Shepherd and your best friend.

In John 10:11, Jesus reveals Himself as the Shepherd declaring “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” In John 10:14, Jesus declared: “I am the good shepherd and know my sheep, and am known of mine” (John 10:14, KJV). From these passages we learn that Jesus is our Shepherd, He is a good shepherd, He knows us, we know Him, and He lays down His life for us.

The very fact that the Bible reveals the Lord as a Shepherd infers that He has sheep. Who are these sheep? According to the Bible, people are His sheep: Know that the Lord, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. (Psalm 100:3, NKJV)

The Bible says that when Jesus saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them “because they were as sheep not having a shepherd” (Mark 6:34, KJV). He saw people as sheep in need of a shepherd. The reason we need a Shepherd is because: All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6, NKJV)

Because of sin, we have all gone our own rebellious ways. Only through the death of Jesus Christ can we return to the Shepherd of our souls. It is that simple, yet so marvelous and wonderful that it is hard to fathom.

The Bible reveals that there is one sheepfold and one shepherd. The "fold" is the Church which is composed of all born-again believers. The "shepherd" is Jesus Christ. There is only one way into the fold, and that is through Jesus who said: "...I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved" (John 10:9, NKJV).

The sheepfold is not exclusive. The door is open to all who come to Him: And other sheep, I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice, and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. (John 10:16, NKJV)

At the time of Christ's ministry, shepherds developed a close relationship with their sheep. The shepherd was there at the birth of a lamb and he guided them their entire lifetime. Shepherds loved their sheep, gave each one a name, and cared for each one tenderly. Many a shepherd interposed himself between wild beasts and his sheep in order to protect them, and at night he slept in the single doorway to his sheepfold to guard them from predators. An enemy would have to pass by the shepherd in order to attack the flock.

Using this analogy, Jesus is your spiritual shepherd: -He is the Good Shepherd who knows you by name: I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. (John 10:14,27, NKJV)

-He is the Compassionate Shepherd who is touched by your infirmities: For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, KJV)

-He is the Comforting Shepherd who comforts you in all of your tribulations: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4, NKJV)

-He is the Saving Shepherd who gives His life for you: I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. (John 10:11, NKJV)

-He is the Living Shepherd who was resurrected from death in order to save you from the power of sin and death: 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, 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. (Hebrews 13:20-21, NKJV)

-He is the Seeking Shepherd who came to save the lost: ...for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. (Luke 19:10, NKJV)

-He is the Concerned Shepherd who loves lost sheep: What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' (Luke 15:4-6, NKJV).

-He is the Chief Shepherd who will return to save you from the presence of sin: ...and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:4, NKJV)

THE SHEPHERD'S MARK

In the natural world, shepherds mark their sheep for identification by branding them with a unique logo indicating ownership. Spiritually, there is a distinct mark upon the man or woman of God that differentiates them from the world and identifies them as part of Christ's flock: My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. (John 10:27-29, NKJV)

When you chose to follow the Good Shepherd, you became one of His sheep. He knows you, His has placed His mark upon you, and no one can take you out of His hand. Just as Shepherds brand their sheep in the natural world to confirm ownership, you are "branded" as His lamb. He has also written your name on the palm of His hands: Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, Yet I will not

forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands. (Isaiah 49:15-16, NKJV)

The sad fact is that some will choose not to follow. Jesus said: “But you do not believe, because you are not of my sheep...” (John 10:26, KJV). It is for these lost lambs that the Shepherd continuously searches.

THE SHEPHERD'S SEARCH

The Bible declares that our spiritual Shepherd came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). The word “seek” as used here means to “search with intensity”. So, what or who is lost for which the Shepherd is so earnestly seeking?

We know that Jesus came to save lost souls from sin, but He also came to save “that” which was lost, meaning all that was lost through sin. So what was lost?

-Man’s relationship with God was affected. No longer could sinful mankind enter God’s presence.

-Man’s peaceful relationship with others was lost. Adam blamed Eve for his sin and their son, Cain, killed his brother Abel.

-Man’s relationship with the environment was affected. Previously, work was a joy, but as a result of sin man had to labor under the curse of weeds, thorns, and pests.

-Man’s emotional well-being was lost. Fear and shame entered into the psyche.

-Health was lost, as pain and disease entered the world.

-Eternal life was lost, as death became the penalty for sin.

The good news is that Jesus Christ, your Shepherd, came to restore all that was lost through sin. He is not on a salvage operation, but a mission of complete restoration. His purpose is not to make you a patched up version of your old self, but to make you a new creature in Christ.

-He restores your relationship with God: Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet

without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16, NKJV)

-He restores your relationship with others: But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. (Ephesians 2:13-19, NKJV)

-He reverses the curse, so that your labor can be a joy: Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree. (Galatians 3:13, NKJV)

-He calms every fear: Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32, KJV) -He bears your shame so that you need not bear it: Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2, KJV)

-He restores your health: But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5, KJV)

-He restores everlasting life: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16-17, KJV)

Whatever your loss through sin, sickness, heartache, circumstances, or relationships, the Good Shepherd came to seek and save that loss.

IS HE YOUR SHEPHERD?

You have tried life on your own. How is that working for you? Do you lack true purpose and direction for your life? Do you feel bogged down in the mud and mire of this world? Are you turning to things like drugs and alcohol to ease your pain? Are you unable to find the green pastures and cool waters of life? Then you need the Shepherd!

Take time right now to read John chapter 3 which explains in detail what it means to be born-again. To become part of the fold of the Good Shepherd, take these steps:

Step One: Acknowledge you are a sinner. “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Step Two: Recognize that the penalty of sin is death. God warned Adam and Eve that if they sinned, they would die. This meant both spiritual death, which is separation from God's presence, and physical death.

When Jesus died on the cross He died in your place. He died for your sins so you could have everlasting life: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23, KJV). If you accept His sacrifice for sin, you are no longer under the penalty of death.

You are no longer spiritually dead, separated from the presence of God: For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation...For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. (Portions of Ephesians 2:14 and 18, NKJV)