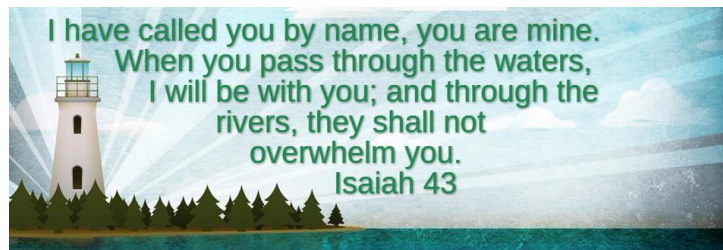


Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10



THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The lessons we study today, especially Psalm 23 and John 10, are about *shepherds*. Jesus is the *Good Shepherd* (John 10:11, 14). Peter calls him the *Shepherd and Guardian of your souls* (1 Pet 2:25). Throughout scripture, men are said to be like *sheep* (for example, Isa 53:6). Today we put satellites in space and send information through optical fibers around the world, but the analogy still holds. We are always like sheep. We may not all be ranchers, but we know how sheep behave, and we understand the analogy.

The word *shepherd* appears in 54 places in the RSV Bible¹, and in nearly all instances refers to shepherds of people, not animals. Our discussion today deals with some of these instances. Taken together, they reveal that in your life today, you have three options: (1) You can choose to go through each day on your own, without a shepherd, (2) you can choose to follow false shepherds, or (3) you can choose to follow Jesus, your true Shepherd. The scriptures explain the consequences of each of these options. The choice is up to you.

There is a story running through the Bible, beginning with Moses and concluding in Revelation. It is about Jesus Christ – the *Great Shepherd of the sheep* (Heb 13:20) – about how and why he became the great Shepherd, and about why believers are known as “his sheep.” Consider these eight “chapters” in the story:

1. Num 27:15-19. *Moses said to the Lord, “Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep which have no shepherd.” And the Lord said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit ...”*

Joshua succeeded Moses as the *shepherd* of Israel. What was special about Joshua, according to this passage? In what ways did Moses and Joshua act as *shepherds* of the people of God?

2. 2 Sam 5:1-5. *Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, “Behold, we are your bone and flesh. In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you that led out and brought in Israel; and the Lord said to you, ‘You shall be shepherd of my people Israel ...’”*

Here we begin to see a pattern, or shadow of things to come. Joshua and David both could trace their ancestors back to Abraham. Each had a longing to obey God, as well as love and concern for God’s people.

3. 1 Ki 22:13-23. *“And the messenger who went to summon Micaiah said to him, ‘Behold, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them ...’”*

These were dark times in Israel’s history. As Israel’s shepherd, King Ahab was a disaster. He worshipped false gods and heeded his wife Jezebel, and no one seemed sure of the right course to take.

No ship of state has yet managed to steer a safe course without God. Ahab refused to heed the words of Micaiah. The result was the eventual downfall of Israel. Micaiah’s vision, “*All Israel scattered upon the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd*” (v.17) epitomizes the nation that ignores the will of God.

In the Navy, a ship’s safe passage on the high seas depends on three factors: (1) the integrity of the ship itself, (2) its ability to navigate safely in formation with other ships, and (3) the captain’s knowledge of the ship’s destination. When the “ship” is a nation led by false shepherds, all three factors can go wrong.

4. Ps 23 (KJV). ¹*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.* ²*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.* ³*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth 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 ...*

¹ Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

There are always people who, like David, recognize God as the true *Shepherd* of his people. How many hearts have been comforted by the words of Psalm 23? How often has this psalm been recited quietly in the hearts of people, in times of joy as well as times of sorrow? The answer is known to the Lord – our *Shepherd* who cares deeply for his sheep. Discuss v.2-6 of the psalm. How does each verse describe the care of the Shepherd for his sheep? According to v.3, *why* does the Shepherd care for his sheep?

5. Ps 49:13-15. *This is the fate of those who have foolish confidence, the end of those who are pleased with their portion. Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.*

This is about people who trust only in themselves. *Sheol* is the final home of those who have *foolish confidence* in themselves, and so unwittingly (sometimes even willingly) elect Death as their shepherd, and are separated forever from Jesus, the Shepherd of Life. There is nothing a person can do in his or her power to avoid this fate. But God did what was necessary. He gave the life of his Son to ransom the souls of men.

6. Ezek 34:2 -10. *“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! ...”*

The “shepherds” of Israel were if anything worse than the sheep they were supposed to care for. They cared only for themselves and paid no heed to the needs of the people, whom God had given into their care. When the shepherds, that is, the leaders of the people, are like this, the whole nation has a big problem.

7. Ezek 34:11-16. *For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered ...*

God began to fulfill this prophecy when the remnant returned from captivity (~536 B.C.), occupied Jerusalem, and rebuilt the Temple. Ultimately, the prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, as we see next.

8. John 10:7-18. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not heed them. I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved ...”*

In this passage (v.11, 14), Jesus is the *good shepherd* as well as *the door of the sheep*. The *wolf* (v.12) is the enemy the Shepherd warned about, and must destroy. But he is not what the people expected him to be. The real enemy of the people was not “them.” It was not the Roman army, nor is it today the government, nor whomever we are currently in a mood to blame. The real enemies of the sheep are sin and its consequence: death. These enemies are within us, and Jesus Christ came to save us from them. It was *necessary* for Christ to come. We ourselves cannot overcome the sin and death in our own flesh.

Last week we read Luke 24:25-27, “... *Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?*” And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to the disciples on the road to Emmaus the OT scriptures that say, in effect, that it was *necessary* for him to come.

The people expected another kind of shepherd, and they crucified Jesus. Even though all this was foretold in prophecy, and even though Jesus said he would rise again, his followers fell away and were scattered. All this was prophesied as well. Zechariah 13:7 says, “*Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me,*” says the Lord of hosts. “*Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones.*” Jesus himself referred to this and said to his disciples, “*You will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered*” (Matt 26:31).

When Jesus rose from the dead, he brought life into the world. The Holy Spirit began to convince the hearts of people, and within two months, thousands repented and were saved. Jesus became, and is forever, the *great Shepherd* of this flock. “*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls*” (1 Peter 2:24-25).

Where are you today in this picture? Are you among those who are even now “straying like sheep?” Can you not see, in the scriptures we have discussed, why the cross was *necessary* in your case? God is calling you *now*, and *now* is the time to repent, and *return to the Shepherd and Guardian of your soul!*