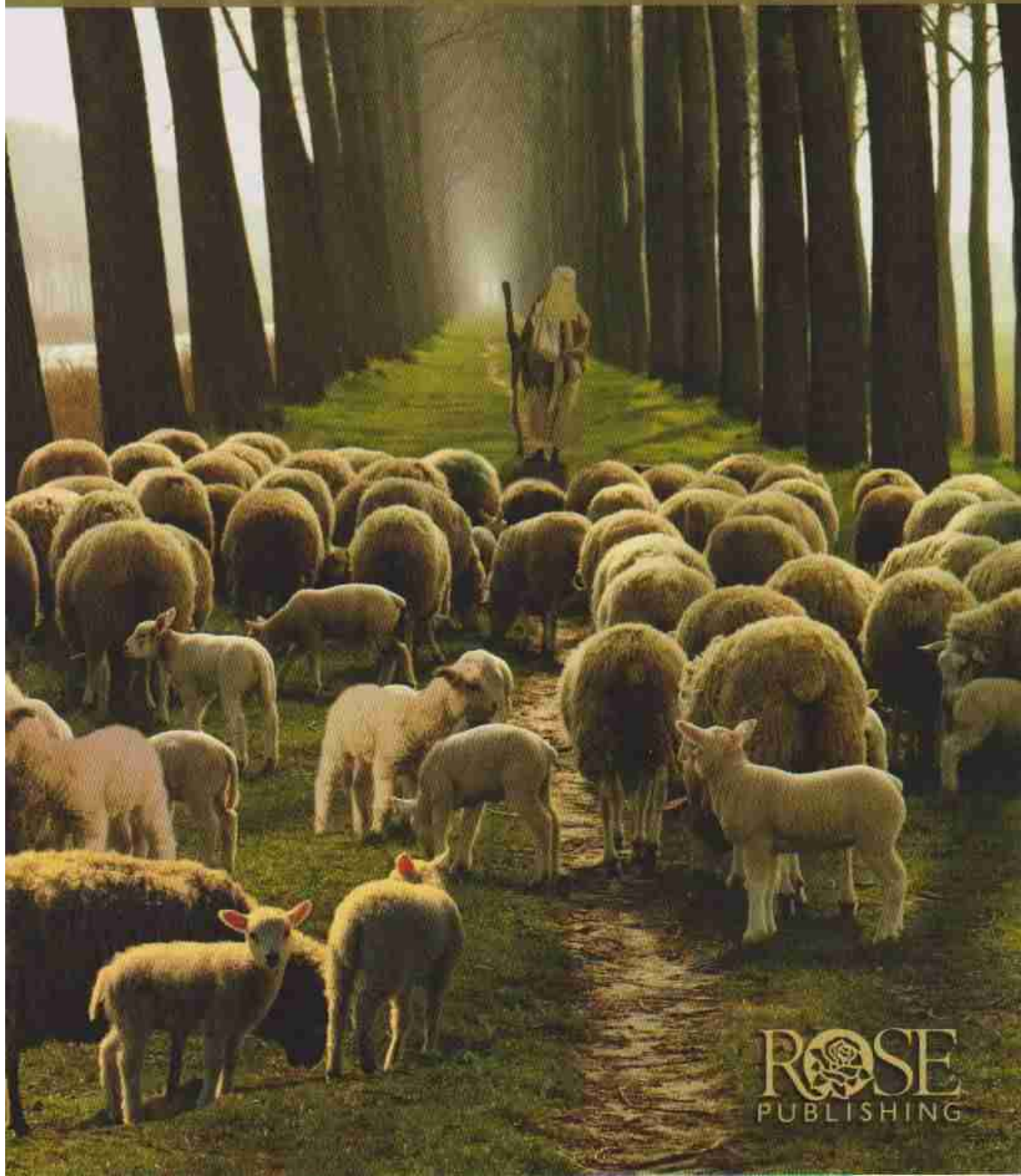


The Beloved Psalm Brought to Life for Today's Readers

Psalm 23



ROSE
PUBLISHING

Psalm 23

- ¹ *The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not be in want.*
- ² *He makes me lie down
in green pastures,
he leads me beside
quiet waters,*
- ³ *he restores my soul.
He guides 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 love
will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in
the house of the LORD forever.*

Psalm 23 is one of the dearest passages of the Bible. This beautiful poem about God and his people speaks directly to the joys and fears of any human being. It is a beautiful reminder that the LORD is a caring and compassionate God. It also reminds us that, like sheep, we depend on God's care and provision.

The language of the Psalm comes from life in the field with sheep. For many urban dwellers, the concepts and metaphors in the Psalm are unfamiliar. By exploring words and images in context, one can better understand the message and appreciate the beauty of this favorite psalm.

The Shepherd's Care

Psalm 23 reveals that we belong wholly to God, not only because God made us, but because he redeems and remakes us. The language of the Psalm shows how he does it.

In verse 4, the pronoun shifts from *he* to *you*. But there is also a shift from language about sheep to language about humans. Through the first part of the verse, the imagery concentrates on pastures, still waters, and sheep paths. After verse four, the imagery centers on human things—table, anointing of the head, overflowing cup. The language shift is so subtle, it is hardly noticeable; however, this change mirrors the change that takes place in people and nations that embrace God as their shepherd. Recognizing our need for God and his discipline is a humanizing experience, one of the major themes throughout Scripture.

The LORD is my shepherd

MEANING: God leads and cares for me.

Sheep are able to recognize their shepherd and carry on a simple relationship with him. They are docile creatures and are capable of giving and receiving affection. Care for the sheep means ownership of them. Shepherds often mark their sheep with a notch cut in the ear or by some other distinguishing mark.

APPLICATION: We are like sheep under God's care and guidance. We belong to God in two ways: We belong to him because he *created* us, and we belong to him because he *saved* us. As believers, we are called to suffer with him and bear his mark of love (Philippians 3:10; John 17:20–23).

- How do we show other people that we have the mark of Christ on us?
- In what ways has God led you?
- How do you experience God's care in your life?

RELATED PASSAGES:

John 10:1–18; Ezekiel 34:31




The Mark of the Christian

The Bible speaks of God's mark on the believer. Ephesians 1:13 speaks of being marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. What is this mark? Some faith traditions, as an act of worship, use the symbol of the cross on the believer. Hand movements, oil, jewelry, and more have been used for this purpose, but these are only symbols of a deeper reality.

The mark of the Christian involves suffering (see Philippians 1:29 and 1 Peter 4:12–13). Paul indicates this in passages like Galatians 3:17 and Philippians 3:10. Jesus refers to the same when he identifies the disciple with the teacher (Matthew 10:24–25). But the mark must involve more than just suffering, since suffering is common to all humans. Jesus, in his final prayer before his own suffering on the cross, connects the suffering of the disciple with unity in God's love (John 17:13–23). It is the love Christians bear for each other while under fire that is the distinguishing mark, the very seal of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5; 1 Corinthians 8:3).

Shepherds and Sheep

Shepherds appear in the Bible many times. As the table below shows, the language and images from shepherding were common for people in biblical times.

Shepherds in the Old Testament	Shepherds in the New Testament
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abel (<i>Genesis 4:2</i>) • Jabal (<i>Genesis 4:20</i>) • Abraham (<i>Genesis 13:2–6</i>) • Lot (<i>Genesis 13:5–6</i>) • Isaac (<i>Genesis 26:17–33</i>) • Rachel (<i>Genesis 29:9</i>) • Jacob (<i>Genesis 31:4</i>) • The Sons of Israel (<i>Genesis 46:31–32</i>) • Jethro’s Daughters (<i>Exodus 2:16</i>) • Moses (<i>Exodus 3:1</i>) • David (<i>1 Samuel 16:11</i>) • Uzziah (<i>2 Chronicles 26:10</i>) • The Recabites (<i>Jeremiah 35:6–10</i>) • Figurative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ of God—the Shepherd (<i>Genesis 49:24; Psalm 23; 78:52; 80:1; Ezekiel 34:15</i>); ~ of the leaders of Israel (<i>Isaiah 56:11; Ezekiel 34</i>); ~ of Cyrus (<i>Isaiah 44:28</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Shepherds of the Nativity (<i>Luke 2:8–20</i>) • Figurative of Jesus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ the Shepherd (<i>Isaiah 40:11; Zechariah 13:7; Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27; 1 Peter 2:25</i>); ~ the Good Shepherd (<i>John 10:11–16</i>); ~ the Great Shepherd (<i>Hebrews 13:20</i>); ~ the Chief Shepherd (<i>1 Peter 5:4</i>) <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">  </div>

I shall not be in want

MEANING: My deepest needs shall be met. I need not desire more.

Sheep may develop a habit of wandering off the shepherd’s pastureland in search of “greener pastures.” Because they have few defenses, safety in numbers is necessary for survival. A stray sheep is easy prey and the watchful protection of a caring shepherd is crucial to sheep that have a tendency to wander. Sheep have differing personality traits and stubborn sheep may teach others of the herd to wander.

APPLICATION: We can trust in God’s provision and care for us.

RELATED PASSAGES: John 16:23–27; Matthew 6:8

He makes me lie down in green pastures

MEANING: God makes me free to rest.

Sheep will not rest unless they are free from conflicts with other sheep, free from predators, free from pests, and free from hunger. The shepherd must protect the sheep from problems outside and inside the herd. The shepherd has to find feeding grounds where the sheep can eat safely—a place without parasites, predators that endanger the sheep, and with plenty of green pastures where the sheep can eat and rest safely.



APPLICATION: We can rest in God's security and provision.

- How does God give you rest?
- What does it mean for you to "lie down in green pastures"?

RELATED PASSAGES: Matthew 11:28–30



He leads me beside quiet waters

MEANING: God supplies me with safe, life-giving drink.

Sheep need fresh, clear water, but they will not drink from waters moving too swiftly. This is because sheep are not good swimmers, especially when they are laden down with a heavy woolen coat. But the good shepherd will not let them drink from filthy contaminated pools either. He will lead the sheep to the still waters.

APPLICATION: We can drink deeply of God's Holy Spirit who is water to our thirsty souls.

RELATED PASSAGES: John 4:10-14; 7:37-39; Revelation 22:1

The Shepherd's Job

The job of the shepherd was to lead the sheep to safe pasture and to protect them along the way. The job of feeding the flock might involve removing poisonous plants or, in the case of a snowfall, pulling down vegetation from high branches. Keeping sheep from straying into cultivated fields was also a part of the shepherd's responsibility. Protection involved caring for the weak or sick, retrieving the lost, and guarding against predators.

The Shepherd's Duties	Jesus' Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Leads the sheep to safe pasture and water.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jesus calls disciples to follow wherever he leads (Matthew 4:18-22; John 10:4-9).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Protects the sheep from predators, pests, parasites, other sheep, and natural dangers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jesus warns, intercedes and rescues (Mark 8:15; John 17:12-15; Matthew 20:28; John 10:15).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Feeds the sheep, including removing poisonous plants and providing access to foliage on high branches or after a snowfall.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jesus feeds the crowds. He himself is the bread of life (Matthew 14:13-21; 15:32-39; John 6:22-71)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Cares for the weak or sick lambs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jesus cares for the sick and weak (Matthew 14:14, 34-36)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Disciplines wayward sheep and retrieving the lost.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jesus rebukes his disciples and finds those who have lost their way (Matthew 14:29-31; 16:23; Luke 22:31-34)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Protects cultivated land and crops from the sheep.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jesus guides his disciples in the way of caring about others (Luke 6:27-36)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Prevents over grazing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jesus teaches his disciples to be wise and harmless (Matthew 10:16)

He restores my soul

MEANING: God cares for and keeps my heart and mind.

Sheep may become “cast,” stuck on their backs, unable to get up. A downcast sheep is one that has rolled over into a depression and cannot right itself to stand. In this condition, a sheep struggling to raise itself may quickly become dehydrated in the summer sun. A cast sheep is also easy prey for wild animals. Top heavy, body down in a hole, legs flailing the air, a sheep in this state is a funny sight to see—funny, but also helpless.

APPLICATION: We can trust God for the needs of the body and the spirit.

- How has God restored your soul?

RELATED PASSAGES: John 16:33; 17:13; Psalms 42:11

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

MEANING: God will lead us on the right path because of his great promise.

Sheep are creatures of habit. By overgrazing, they will eventually destroy their own pastures. They must be led to new pastureland. Only the shepherd knows the best pasture and the best way to get there and he will lead them because the sheep are in his name.

APPLICATION:

We are to follow God's way, not our own destructive ways.

- Are there any paths in your journey that you need to leave?



**RELATED
PASSAGES:**
John 10:4; 14:6

Shepherd Imagery Illustrative of:

Leaders	Prophets, Priests, and Levites	Isaiah 56:11; Ezekiel 34:1-16; Zechariah 11:4-17
Kings	David and Cyrus	1 Samuel 16:11-13; Isaiah 44:28.
God	The Shepherd of Israel	Genesis 49:24; Psalm 80:1
God and Helpers	Under-shepherds	Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 34; John 10:12-14; 1 Peter 5:1-4
Enemies	Wild beasts, Wolves, and Lions	Ezekiel 34:5; Matthew 7:15; 1 Peter 5:8
Types of Jesus	Joseph, Moses, and David	Genesis 37:2-14; Exodus 3:1; 1 Samuel 16:11-13
Christ/Messiah	The Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd, the Chief Shepherd	Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:22-24; 37:24; Zechariah 13:7; John 10:11-30; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 5:4



*Even though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me*

MEANING: God knows and deals with my fears about the deadly dangers of life.

Valleys on the way to the high pastureland often have the best grass because they contain water and the sun has not dried out the grass, but they can also be places of dark danger for the sheep.

APPLICATION: We can trust God even when he appears to lead us into a scary place.

- Have you walked through “the valley of the shadow of death” in your life and felt God’s comforting presence with you in any way?

RELATED PASSAGES: Matthew 6:13; 1 Corinthians 10:13

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me

MEANING: God, your discipline and guidance make me feel safe.

Notice the change in personal pronouns—from *he* to *you*—here in the middle of the poem. The Psalmist’s address to God becomes more personal. It is like the sheep’s need to learn to trust the shepherd. The shepherd’s rod protects and disciplines, the staff guides and saves.

The Importance of Sheep

Sheep were very important in the life and economy of Israel. Here are some of the uses of sheep. The following list describes the different uses of sheep in ancient Israel.

- Food—Meat, Milk, Cheese (Deuteronomy 32:13–14).
- Sacrifices—Whole burnt offering, Peace offering, Sin offering, Guilt offering, Passover lamb (Leviticus 1:2, 3:6, 4:32, 5:6; Exodus 12:3)
- Clothing—Leather skins, Woolen clothing (Genesis 38:12–17; Deuteronomy 18:3–5)
- Writing material—Scrolls
- Pets (2 Samuel 12:3)
- Royal tribute (2 Kings 3:4)

APPLICATION: We can trust in God's guidance and his discipline as assuring and positive.

- How have you felt God's comfort in your life during times of grief or problems?

RELATED PASSAGES: Micah 7:14; 1 Corinthians 11:32; Hebrews 12:5-6

Rod and Staff in the Bible

The rod and the staff were two essential tools for the shepherd. The shepherd carried a rod in his belt to protect the sheep. The staff served as support for the shepherd. It also was a symbol of authority. The Bible uses both tools as metaphors. Sometimes, rods are God's tools for justice or punishment. Staffs symbolize people in authority or even the Messiah. The following table shows some examples of the Bible's use of both rod and staff.

Rod	Scripture	Staff	Scripture
Moses' rod—Turned to snake and back, tool for some of the plagues in Egypt, parted the sea, brought water from a rock, defeated Amalekites	Exodus 4:1-20; 7:14-18; 9:22-26; 10:12-15; 14:16-22; 17:5-13; Numbers 20:6-13	Jacob's staff—Only possession, his trust in God	Genesis 32:10; Hebrews 11:21
Aaron's rod—Turned to snake and swallowed others, brought plagues of frogs and gnats, budded as a sign	Exodus 7:8-25; 8:5-19; Numbers 17:1-11	Judah's staff—A pledge	Genesis 38:18-26
Jonathan's rod—Dipped in honey	1 Samuel 14:27-30	Israelites' staff at Passover	Exodus 12:11
Tool of discipline	Exodus 21:20; 2 Samuel 7:14; Proverbs 13:24	Balaam's staff	Numbers 22:27
God's rod	Job 21:9; Psalm 23:4; Isaiah 10:5	Angel's staff	Judges 6:21
Oppressor's rod	Isaiah 9:4	David's staff	1 Samuel 17:14
Israel as God's inheritance	Jeremiah 10:16; 51:19	Benaiah's staff	2 Samuel 23:21
Measuring tool	Revelation 11:1	Elisha's staff	2 Kings 4:25-37
Assyria	Isaiah 10:5	Pharaoh/Egypt	2 Kings 18:21
		God's staff	Psalm 23:4
Messiah to be struck with on the cheek	Micah 5:1	Assyria	Isaiah 10:5
Messiah's rod	Psalm 2:9; Isaiah 11:4; Revelation 2:27; 12:5; 19:15	Zechariah's staff—Symbolic of Israel pointing to the Messiah	Zechariah 11:7-17; 12:10; 13:7

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies

MEANING: God, you provide for my hunger even when my enemies surround me.

Often the shepherd must prepare the pasture to remove poisonous plants. Natural predators often wait at the margins of the tableland for a chance to attack. The shepherd must be on guard.

APPLICATION: We can be confident that God will take care of our needs, even when we are hated or in danger.

- How have you seen God acting to favor you even when the odds were against you?

RELATED PASSAGES: John 10:9–14

You anoint my head with oil

MEANING: God, you take care of my bodily needs.

Flying insects often plague the sheep in the summer months. Oil is a natural bug repellent and emollient that aids in healing the skin. Palestinian shepherds used a mixture of oil, sulfur, and spices applied especially around the head. The shepherd would use this mixture to care for the sheep.

In addition, pouring oil on someone's head was also an act of hospitality (see Luke 7:46), offering a way for guests to clean and refresh themselves. The psalmist here is grateful for God's hospitality.

The Shepherd's Tools

- Coat or outer garment to protect against the elements
- Oil medical care
- Defensive weapon such as a sling, throwing stick or rod
- Staff for guiding sheep and to aid in hiking
- Sometimes a musical instrument (small pipes or harp) to while away the time

APPLICATION: We are to trust God to provide for the needs of the body.

- If you make a list of the many things you have, can you see God's hand providing for your needs, and more?

RELATED PASSAGES: Matthew 6:25–33

My cup overflows

MEANING: My provision from God is abundant. The good shepherd provides more than the bare necessities to his sheep.

He is willing to take the sheep to better grazing and water sources even if it means cost and danger. Jesus was willing to die for his sheep (John 10:15). If his is willing to give his life, he is also willing to give anything that we need (Matthew 6:25–34).

APPLICATION: We can rest assured that God will more than provide for us.

RELATED PASSAGES: John 10:10; Romans 5:17; Ephesians 3:20–21

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life

MEANING: God's goodness and grace will be with me my whole life.

Sheep, when properly managed and cared for, can aid in the fertility of the land, transforming wilderness into parkland and fertile fields. The good shepherd makes blessing follow his sheep. We can see God's loving blessing on his people not only on individual basis, or for our benefit alone. Often God's blessings extend from each of God's people or from the church itself and become blessings for others as well.

APPLICATION: We can be certain that God will always be with us for blessing.

- How can you identify God's goodness in different areas of your life?

RELATED PASSAGES: Matthew 28:19–20; John 14:18

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever

MEANING: I shall live eternally with God.

Sheep, after spending the summer in the high pastures, are taken back to the shepherd's property in the fall and the winter. In the psalm,

“dwelling in the house of the LORD” may mean to live within the realm of God’s provision and protection. For Christians, it also may mean a certainty of God’s love for the church (Romans 8:35–39).

APPLICATION: Our lives are secure forever in Christ, the Good Shepherd.

RELATED PASSAGES: John 3:16

Shepherding Imagery

The use of sheep and shepherding as an illustration in the Bible is common. The use of this imagery goes all the way back to Genesis 49:24, where God is called the Shepherd. The patriarchs, whose lives revolved around shepherding, easily understood the connection between their experience with sheep and God’s care.

Old Testament	New Testament
God is the Shepherd of Israel (Psalm 80:1)	Christ is the Chief Shepherd
God’s appointed leaders are under-shepherds (Ezekiel 34).	The elders are shepherds under Christ (1 Peter 5:2).
Moses and David were shepherds in their early careers before being made leaders of God’s people.	Christ commissioned his disciples to care for his sheep and referred to them as sheep (Matthew 10:6, 16; John 21:16–17).
Foreign leaders were sometimes designated shepherds when their leadership impacted God’s people (Isaiah 44:28).	
The saving nature of these leaders pointed to God’s promised leader, the Messiah, to come (Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:22–24; 37:24).	He referred to himself as the Good Shepherd. He taught about his relationship to his people as a shepherd cares for his sheep (John 10:1–30).
The prophets depicted the distress of Israel without leadership or bad leaders in terms of a flock without a shepherd (Ezekiel 34:1–10; Zechariah 10:2; 13:7).	The New Testament described the people as “sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36; Mark 6:34). But it was Jesus himself who made the most use of the image. Jesus used sheep and shepherds in parables about people (Matthew 12:11–12; 18:12–14; 25:31–46).
Zechariah wrote about God’s shepherd who would be struck down.	Christ himself pointed to the prophetic word in Zechariah 13:7 as referring to himself and the events around his death (Mark 14:27). Others also identified Jesus with the lamb of sacrifice (John 1:29; Acts 8:32; 1 Peter 1:19; Revelation 5:6).

Sheep as Illustrative of:

People	Individual and National	Psalms 23:1; 79:13; 95:7
Sinful People	Wayward, Foolish, and Lost	Isaiah 53:4-6; Ezekiel 34:1-19; Mark 6:34
Sacrificial Lamb	The Suffering Servant	Isaiah 53:7-12; John 1:29

Psalm 23 is a powerful declaration of trust in God. The vivid images from a very concrete, common activity—shepherding—describes a caring, tender, welcoming God. This same God is always able and ready to protect his sheep. In this song, the psalmist celebrates that he belongs to this God. The tenderness, care and protectiveness of God become even clearer in the life and ministry of Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd who gave his life for his sheep. The human needs for acceptance, protection, provision, love, and salvation are all perfectly met in Christ.

The Bible tells us that Jesus, who is the Word of God, bought us with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). That price was his death that redeemed us from our own self-destruction. That means God has a claim on us as both our Savior and Creator. From the animal to the human, from people of dust to people of the living God, we are twice and truly owned by the Good Shepherd.

