

THEN SINGS MY SOUL | *Capturing the spirit of worship from the Psalms for Today*

Lesson 12 | The Shepherd Songs We Sing

In last quarter's Psalms study, we studied the two primary Psalm structures, lament and praise, and grouped them in the following psalm groupings: Hallelujah, Lament, Confidence, Thanksgiving, Historical, Wisdom, Penitential/Imprecatory, Messianic and Hallel; this week we will focus on Shepherd Psalms.

First, when we say the Shepherd's Psalms, what we are referencing is a small collection that expositors have put together from the Psalter sometimes called the Shepherd Psalm Trilogy (Psalms 22, 23, and 24). However, only Psalm 23, a thanksgiving psalm, uses the term *shepherd*. Other Psalms describe God as Shepherd. In Psalm 28:9, David said, "Save Your people and bless Your inheritance; Be their shepherd also and carry them forever." Asaph said in 78:71-72, "From the care of the ewes with suckling lambs He brought him to shepherd Jacob His people... he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart and guided them with his skillful hands." Asaph again addressed Yahweh by the title of "Shepherd of Israel" in his prayer to petition His protection of Jacob's people (Psalm 80:1).

Sometimes, even in the Psalms, the work of the shepherd is attributed to other things – like death – in this song of the Korahites who said, "As sheep they (i.e. the fool, v.13) are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; And the upright shall rule over them in the morning, And their form shall be for Sheol to consume So that they have no habitation" (Psalm 49:1) and in other writings – to different – people. Homer regularly styled Greek chiefs as shepherds of their people. In fact, history has shown, rulers were considered worthy of respect based on their ability to 'pasture' their people.

Therefore, the point is that when the Lord is called Shepherd, it is less a title than it is a description of function. Weldon Keller's book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalms 23* [Zondervan, 1997] gives insight into the habits of a flock of sheep. He said that sheep depend on the shepherd for their *wellbeing*. Sheep are sociable animals that travel together in a large flock but not too close together; they like their personal space. And sometimes sheep lose their connection to the flock which places them in danger. Sheep are rarely aware of the perils that surround them. "At the beginning of the spring just before sheering when the streams and rivers are full and running deep the shepherd must keep the sheep away from swiftly moving water. Sometimes it is even necessary for the shepherd to dam up a portion of the stream so his animals can drink [23:2b "He leads me beside streams of still water..."]. If the shepherd does not protect them in this way, the sheep, in their thirst, will wade out into the swiftly moving water and when their thick wool coats absorb too much water they will fall over and drown. The sheep learn the sound of the voice of their shepherd so that when he calls to them they will come to him, but they will run from the voice of a stranger."

Jacob on his deathbed made this same analogy when he declared that God had been his "shepherd all of his life to this day" (Genesis 48:24). In Rev. 7:17, when the saints who come out of the tribulation are brought before God, John brings together two of the most striking images of the scripture by stating, "for the Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eye." So the use of Shepherd in these psalms has the significance of God's intimate protection and provision – where in the act of thanksgiving and praise, the worshipper sees that God as the Shepherd of his soul.

Why did God choose to include this motif to describe Him in these songs? Perhaps, first, because it was a common occupation for those in the Middle East (even the patriarchs were all shepherds), it was easily relatable. Second, the terrain and geography of the area which lent itself to the raising of both sheep and goats, was known for its scarce grass and less than abundant sources of water. So the need for a Shepherd becomes equally visible when human experience is rarely ever comfortable and easy. And last, God chose this motif (at least in part) because people, even His people, were apt to act like sheep illustrated in scripture like Isaiah 53:6. "Sheep are not only dependent creatures; singularly unintelligent, prone to wandering and unable to find their way to a shepherd even when it is in sight." The analogy is fitting. It is clear, because of our helplessness and our tendency to wander and get lost; we are in need of a Good Shepherd.

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want.
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; He leadeth me
The quiet waters by.

My soul He doth restore again;
And me to walk doth make
Within the paths of righteousness,
Even for His own name's sake.

Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
Yet will I fear no ill;
For Thou art with me; and Thy rod
And staff my comfort still.

My table Thou hast furnishèd
In presence of my foes;
My head Thou dost with oil anoint,
And my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me;
And in God's house forevermore
My dwelling place shall be.

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The Lord's My Shepherd | arr. John Campbell (1807-). John Campbell, a Scottish merchant from Glasgow, is regarded by hymnary.org as "an amateur musician and organist" and yet, his musical setting of the Psalm 23 in the Scottish Psalter is by far the most commonly sung. In the early 1640s, Francis Rouse, an English Puritan, took all 150 Psalms from the original Hebrew and translated them into metrical English. The then General Assembly of the Church of Scotland organized committees that took six years to render them into sing-able prose. In 1650, this Scottish Psalter was released and approved for the Church of Scotland, one of the greatest treasures of hymnody – but only this 23rd Psalm still widely used.

The Lord my Shepherd is,
I shall be well supplied.
Since He is mine and I am His,
What can I want beside?

He leads me to the place
Where heavenly pasture grows,
Where living waters gently pass
And full salvation flows.

If e'er I go astray,
He doth my Soul reclaim;
And guides me in His own right way
For His most holy name.

Another remaking of the same Psalm (just the first three verses in our songbook) was an Isaac Watts (1719) hymn, with the music of *Bradbury's Jubilee* (1858) called **The Lord My Shepherd Is**. William Batchelder Bradbury (1816 – 1868) was a musician who composed the tune to "Jesus Loves Me" and many other popular hymns. Of the fifty-nine music book collections he wrote from 1841 until his passing, his largest and most used collection was this Jubilee, published in 1858, in which the music for this hymn was published.

Modern attempts to capture the intimacy and the care of the Shepherd are equally uplifting. Listen to these.

Each Step I Take | W. Elmo Mercer (1932-1919). The songwriting career of Louisiana born Mercer (b. 1932) is proof of how a little opportunity and encouragement can pay off in a huge way. His formal musical training consisted of two years of piano lessons in the 4th-5th grades. At age 14 he wrote his first gospel song, "A Glimpse of Jesus;" by age 19, he had a contract as a staff writer and wrote this hymn, "Each Step I Take" – pretty monumental when you consider the display of life's hardships that the song shares. It's more southern gospel in style than hymn but it's long use among Christians must mean it certainly connects to the spirit of the Psalmist's Shepherd. It has been said that young Elmo was writing what he felt deeply in those years, so while verse one sounds like everything was great, verse two's 'waver(-ing) faith' and a 'chasm' opening before him, and verse 3's reliance on Him 'come what may' tell a different tale. He was in a gloomy place, apparently, and was relating how he maintained a balance – and that was "I trust in God – not matter come what may."

Each step I take my Saviour goes before me,
And with His loving hand He leads the way,
And with each breath I whisper "I adore Thee;"
Oh, what joy to walk with Him each day.

Chorus:
Each step I take I know that He will guide me;
To higher ground He ever leads me on.
Until some day the last step will be taken.
Each step I take just leads me closer home.

At times I feel my faith begin to waver,
When up ahead I see a chasm wide.
It's then I turn and look up to my Saviour,
I am strong when He is by my side.

I trust in God, no matter come what may,
For life eternal in His hand,
He holds the key that opens up the way,
That will lead me to the promised land.

The Lord is my light and my salvation,
Whom shall I fear?
And He is my strength, the defense of my life.
Whom shall I fear?
Have mercy O Lord, and answer my cry.
Turn not away.
For you are my help, the God of salvation.
Turn not away.

Wait, Wait, O Wait on the Lord.
Be strong and take courage! Wait on the Lord.
Wait, Wait, O Wait on the Lord.
Be strong and take courage! Yes, Wait on the Lord!

O Lord, lead me now in your path straight and even.
Teach me Your way.
I will not despair; Your goodness sustains me.
Teach me Your way!
To dwell in His house all the days of my life:
This shall I seek
And O to behold the Lord in His beauty!
This shall I seek.

The Lord is my Light | C.E. Couchman. A newer setting from Psalm 27 by Mrs. Couchman has found its place among many Christians as well. It is a reflection of the leading of the Shepherd without calling Him Shepherd: *You are My Help; Lead me now in Your path straight and even; Your goodness sustains me. It captures the expression of the Psalmist's life in confidence that He alone can provide for those who trust Him.* Its words have even lifted me when I have been in my own "valley of the shadow of death."

And as we conclude, the recent song "Lord Be There" is a nice conclusion to the petition of the Shepherd's Care.