

The Good Shepherd

Study 1 The Shepherd God

The early church used the metaphor and image of a shepherd carrying a sheep frequently in the catacombs. What metaphors are important today reminding us of Christ?

Psalm 23

Read the Psalm as a whole. For each verse:

- Re-read the verse slowly and in different versions of the bible if you have them, trying to imagine shepherding in the Middle East.
 - Reflect together on what the verse tells you about the Shepherd God and what that means for you.
 - Pray together using the verse as a basis to praise God for who he is.
1. Verse 1. Think also of what the needs of sheep are.
 2. Verse 2. Green pastures are seasonal and not common in the Middle East. Sheep will not drink from moving water no matter how thirsty they are.
 3. Verse 3. 'Restores my soul' literally means 'brings me back'. A lost sheep cannot save itself and often gets so traumatized the shepherd must carry it back. Think also what 'for his name's sake' means.
 4. Verse 4. In the Middle East there are a number of ravines which can be several kilometers in length and only a few meters wide (think of the entrance to Petra). Think of the possible dangers sheep might encounter. A rod is about 75 cm long with a mace-like end used to fight off predators. A staff (yes, the pictures you see are correct with a hooked end) is used to rescue sheep.
 5. Verse 5. Think also how this shows costly love. Oil was used for consecration, healing wounds and anointing guests to show hospitality.
 6. Verse 6. Shepherds in the Middle East would always lead their sheep, often with a song to call them. They did not move sheep by following them or herding from behind. Sheep at the back were vulnerable.

To go deeper you might watch Kenneth Bailey, a Bible teacher who lived in the Middle East for over 40 years, explain the Psalm, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXyx8VUwCpk>.

Study 2 I will gather my flock

The passage for this study was written by Jeremiah during the reign of King Zedekiah just before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and Chaldeans. Most of that time Jeremiah was under house arrest and at one point he was lowered into a cistern. Some of the Israelites had already been deported to Babylon. He knew the city would fall yet he is hopeful for the future. Jeremiah found the message and metaphor of Psalm 23 an encouragement.

Jer 23:1-8

Read the passage as a whole. For each cameo:

- Re-read the verse slowly and in different versions of the bible if you have them, trying to imagine the political and spiritual context of Jeremiah's day.
 - Compare the cameo with Psalm 23.
 - Reflect together on what the verse tells you about bad leadership, the Shepherd God and what the cameo means for us including our need for salvation.
1. Verse 1. The bad shepherds are the kings of Israel who introduced idol worship and social injustices. The flock still belongs to God. Contrast with Ps 23:1
 2. Verse 2. God is still in control and will intervene. Compare with Ps 23:3
 3. Verses 3-4. This is the main cameo of the passage. Note that God also delivers from fear. Compare with Ps 23: 3-4.
 4. Verses 5-6. Jeremiah anticipates a new King. In a play on words this new King's name means 'the Lord is our righteousness' while Zedekiah means 'Yahweh is my righteousness'. Contrast the two kings and compare with Jesus. Compare with Ps 23:3, 5
 5. Verses 7-8. What we choose to remember shapes who we are. The people are urged to remember their redemption not the suffering they would experience. God will restore them to their own land. Refer to Ps 23:2.

To go deeper you might watch Kenneth Bailey, a Bible teacher who lived in the Middle East for over 40 years, explain the Jer 23:1-8 (Session 3),

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79rJmDoLF7c>

Pray together

- Praise God as the good shepherd who rescues us from our lostness and restores us to a relationship with him. Pray for those you know who are yet to grasp the wonder of a God who rescues us.
- Pray for both the political and Christian leaders of this world and locally.

Study 3 I will search for my sheep

Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah (See Study 2). He had been taken to Babylon in the first wave of deportation. When he heard of the fall of Jerusalem he was compelled to write this chapter (Ezek 33:22). Experiencing the greatest crisis in the history of Israel Ezekiel doesn't offer a quick fix but instead offers encouragement with his application of Psalm 23 to the plight of the Israelites.

Ezekiel Chapter 34

1. Instead of laying all the blame with the Babylonians who attacked Israel, Ezekiel lays blame with the bad shepherds, the leaders of Israel. What was the fault of the leaders and how did their actions contrast with God the good shepherd found in Psalm 23? (Ezek 34:1-10)
2. What hope does God offer for the future? (Ezek 34:11-16) Notice that God offers more than an initial rescue.
3. Reflect on God's character as the good Shepherd. How might Ezek 34:11-16 be an encouragement to hurting church communities today?

Pray together

- Praise God for who he is, his attributes as good shepherd.
 - Pray for leaders that God brings to mind, both Christian and non-church. Pray they may have the attributes of a good shepherd in their role.
4. Who else does Ezekiel blame for the Israelites predicament? (Ezek 34:17-22) Why does this seem surprising when the fellow sheep are also suffering of oppression and deportation?
 5. Can you think of examples today of how our actions or lack of action might impact others, particularly the weak, negatively? David looked to the good shepherd for guidance to be a good sheep (Psalm 23: 3). How can we avoid being bad sheep?
 6. Reflect on God's character as a just God. How might Ezek 34: 9-10, 20 give hope for the weak and marginalized? Can God the judge be a loving God?
 7. How does Ezek 34:23-30 look forward to Jesus? Hint: Compare v23-24 with Matt 20:28 & Jn 10:11; v25 with Jn 14:27.
 8. Ezek 34:31 is an incredibly intimate statement. The Israelites had to wait a further 600 years before God would realise his promise of a servant shepherd. How might v31 have been an encouragement through those years and be an encouragement for us as when we experience difficult times?

Pray together

- Praise God for who he is, his attributes as both a loving shepherd and judge.
- Pray for each other that God would lead us in righteousness. Pray for wisdom as we live out our love for one another.

Study 4 The Lost Sheep

In this passage Jesus tells a version of Psalm 23 focusing on a sheep that was lost. Describe a situation and how you felt when you lost something very important to you.

Luke 15: 1-7

For each of the following cameos in the passage:

- Re-read the verse slowly and in different versions of the bible if you have them, trying to imagine shepherding in the Middle East.
 - Reflect together on what the verse means for you and who Jesus includes in his kingdom.
 - Pray together using the verse as a basis to praise God for who he is.
1. V1-2 Notice who was present when Jesus told this story. The tax collectors were collecting taxes for the Romans. 'Sinners' usually referred to people of immoral character or those making no effort to keep the Jewish law. The Pharisees were making a genuine effort to keep the law.
 2. V2-3 Note that Jesus' audience knew the Old Testament very well. In Psalm 23, Jer 23: 1-8 and Ezek 34 God was clearly seen as being the good shepherd. What does Jesus imply as he tells this story?
 3. V4 & Ezek 34: 2-4. Notice the contrast between the good shepherd and a bad shepherd when he loses a sheep.
 4. V4 The shepherd's love is acted out in the search and rescue operation. Does the good shepherd love the 99 less when he leaves them behind?

Pray together

Give thanks for Jesus, the good shepherd who came to rescue us.

5. V 4-5 Think about the experience of the lost sheep. Middle Eastern shepherds report that a lost sheep is usually exhausted and traumatized and won't simply follow the shepherd. No matter the size of the sheep they must be carried to safety. The rescue is performed at considerable cost to the shepherd.
6. V7 Notice the order of salvation. Repentance comes after the finding. Reflect on the meaning of repentance and the acceptance of being found.
7. V6-7 Repentance always results in rejoicing. Notice who rejoices.

Pray together

Take some personal time to give thanks to God for his mercy and forgiveness rescuing you. Repent of any areas of your life that are keeping you from God. Accept his rescue. Pray for those you know who are yet to grasp the wonder of a God who rescues us.

To go deeper you might watch Kenneth Bailey, a Bible teacher who lived in the Middle East for over 40 years, explain Luke 15:1-10 (Sessions 4 & 5):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLSxWUGkxU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmQSe6cfEM4>

Study 5 Feeding the Flock

Having a recurring theme or motif associated with a person or idea is a common tool used in many forms of the arts. Merely hearing or seeing the theme again can enable us to feel connected to the art, to understand what is now happening and to recall all we have come to know and feel to date from the theme. The theme of the good shepherd runs through the history of Israel. Recall the attributes and actions of a good shepherd that the Jews of Jesus day would have know well from the Old Testament.

Mark 6:30-52

In this passage we will:

- Try to imagine from a Middle Eastern perspective what the disciples and crowd might have expected from Jesus.
 - Reflect together on how the verses illustrate the shepherding theme initiated in Psalm 23 and who Jesus is.
 - Relating the disciples' experience and understanding to our own life/faith experiences.
1. There are two elements to the background of this story. Notice the disciples' experience in Mark 6: 7-13 & v30-31 that we might relate to.
 2. In the meantime, Jesus' cousin John is unjustly murdered at the hand of a brutal leader, Mark 6: 14-29. In Middle Eastern culture the family of the murdered would be expected to take some revenge. What alternatives might Jesus have taken, given he now had a good following behind him? What might the crowd have expected (see also the same story in John 6: 14-15)?
 3. v34 takes us back to the shepherd theme found in Psalm 23, Jer 23:1 and Ezek 34: 2, 5. In what way were the crowd without a shepherd?
 4. Contrary to what the disciples and crowd might have expected, what did Jesus do (v34)? What do we learn from his actions? Reflect on Jesus dealings with you in stressful situations.
 5. Compare v35-44 with Psalm 23: 2, 5. How do Jesus' actions illustrate the Psalm (remember what it takes to get sheep to lie down)?
 6. In what way are Jesus' actions a response to the crowds' real need of a shepherd? What is the story implying about who Jesus is (remember Jer 23: 5-6 & Ezek 34: 11-16)? How has Jesus provided for your real needs in ways you might not have expected?
 7. v52 Are you surprised at the disciples' response, having experienced a great time in ministry, the miraculous feeding of 5,000 and Jesus coming to them and calming the lake? Reflect on what we can learn about our own heart response to Jesus, especially when his answer to a crisis may not be what we expected or hoped for?

To go deeper you might watch Kenneth Bailey, a Bible teacher who lived in the Middle East for over 40 years, explain Mark 6: 7-52 (Session 6):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYZEKfTNQyc>

Pray together

Take time to reflect on your own heart response to Jesus and re-commit to Jesus as your shepherd who provides all you need. Pray for each other.

Study 6 Jesus the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-18

Scene 1 – v1-6: Village, Morning. Each family would keep their animals penned overnight either under their house or in a walled enclosure attached to the house. As most families would only have a few sheep, a number of families would band together to use the services of a shepherd. Each morning the sheep are eager to get out as they are hungry and tired of being penned up. The shepherd needs only to call out to get the family to open the gate or door letting the sheep out. A stranger would need to knock. The sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd not what (s)he is calling.

1. A new sheep must learn to recognize the shepherd's voice before they will leave the enclosure. How do we learn to recognize the 'voice' of Jesus?
2. At the gate of a village it is not uncommon to have a number of flocks gathered together with multiple shepherds on their way out for the morning. As each shepherd moves off (s)he will call their sheep with a number of shepherds calling at the same time. Sheep will recognize the sound of their shepherd and separate off to follow him/her. What are some of the other voices calling us to follow them away from Jesus our shepherd?

Scene 2 – v7-10: Wilderness, summer when flocks need to go further from the village to find pasture. When a flock is too far from the village to return overnight the shepherds build enclosures using field stones and thorns to pen the sheep safely overnight. As there is no door the shepherd will sleep in the doorway to protect the sheep.

3. V9 The sheep are free to come in and go out, and find pasture. What does freedom in Christ mean for us?
4. V10 contrasts life and death. How did Jesus win abundant life for us?

Scene 3 – v11-15: Wilderness, another threat to the flock.

5. V11 & 14-15 Jesus claims to be '*the* good shepherd'. The relationship between Jesus and his sheep is close and personal. Which shepherd was he referring to and why is Jesus' claim astounding? (See Ps 23:1; Jer 23:3-5; Ezek 34: 11)
6. V12-13 A Lebanese village proverb says 'When the wolf came, the sheep dog ducked behind the bush to relieve itself.' Who might Jesus be referring to as the hireling? (See Jer 23:1; Ezek 34:8)

Scene 4- v14-18: The Easter story in a nutshell

7. Jesus anticipates his death and resurrection but not with a victim mentality. What can we learn from the attitude of Jesus and what it took to achieve our salvation?

Prayer

As you reflect on all you have learnt over this good shepherd series take time to praise God for who he is and Jesus our shepherd.