

The Lord is our Shepherd

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[0 : 00] If you turn with me now back to the passage that we read in Psalm 80, I'd like us to focus particularly on the beginning of this psalm this evening, the first few verses of it.

This morning we touched briefly on the idea that God is our shepherd. We saw in Psalm 100 that God is calling on us to acknowledge him as shepherd.

And that idea of shepherd is very prominent in the Bible, isn't it? Jesus revealed himself as the shepherd. He said, I am the good shepherd. I'd like us to spend a few moments this evening thinking about what that means.

When the Bible tells us that God is our shepherd, when Jesus says, I am the good shepherd, what is it that he's telling us? I'd like us to look at that in light of the opening of Psalm 80.

And the first thing that I would suggest to you this evening is that when we say that God is shepherd, when we say that Jesus is shepherd, we're saying that he is a mighty warrior.

[1 : 09] Now, that's an important thing to emphasize, I think, because very often when we think of a shepherd, we think of someone who is gentle and tender, someone maybe who is humble and approachable.

If we think of the sort of place where a shepherd might work, we think of a pastoral scene. Pastoral means shepherd, doesn't it? A pastoral scene, it's something that's peaceful and idyllic, green hills, gentle flowing streams, something safe and harmless.

Now, some aspects of that, Jesus, for example, is gentle and tender with us. Some aspects of that are true. But sometimes our notions of what it means to be a shepherd may be far removed from the actual reality of being a shepherd.

Sometimes they may be far removed from the way that image is used in the Bible. So, in the first place this evening, as we look at the opening verses of Psalm 80, we see that when God is described as a shepherd, notice the connection that's made there.

Hear us, shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock, you who sit enthroned between the cherubim. You see here, when God is described as a shepherd, he's also been described as a king.

[2 : 42] And that was actually very common in the world in which this psalm was written. Some of you may have seen the coffin that King Tutankhamen was buried in.

Have you seen images of that? And across his chest, he's holding two staffs. And one of them is a shepherd's staff. Because in their world, the king was the shepherd of his people.

In our society, we may have very positive notions of what it means to be a shepherd. Maybe some of you have known shepherds. We think of shepherds as very good people.

But we might not necessarily think of them as the powerful and influential people in society. But in their world, in the way the image was used anyway, a shepherd was the most powerful person.

Because he was the king. And notice how this king is described. We're told that he's the one who sits enthroned between the cherubim. And these cherubim, they were like angels.

[3 : 54] Again, we have angels as sort of little babies with wings, don't we? The way they depicted angels, they were fearsome winged creatures. And again, in the society that they lived in, kings would sometimes portray themselves that way.

They would have thrones that were carved with great winged creatures on the side. Who were their guardians. If you look later on in the psalm, for example, Psalm 99.

The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble. He sits enthroned between the cherubim. If God is shepherd, then God is king.

If God is sitting between the cherubim, he is this great and exalted king. And Psalm 99 goes on to say, let the earth shake. Describing God as shepherd, describing Jesus as shepherd, it's not describing him as lowly.

It's describing him as someone who is exalted and who is an overwhelming warrior. Psalm 97 uses similar language to describe the king.

[5 : 10] The Lord reigns, the Lord is king. Let the earth be glad. Let the distant shores rejoice.

Clouds and thick darkness surround him. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side.

His lightnings light up the world. The earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord. Before the Lord of all the earth.

You see, in Psalm 80, when it tells us that God is shepherd, hear us, shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock, you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, and it's drawing attention to the fact that God is king.

Not only is he just king, he is a mighty warrior. And when we say that Jesus is shepherd, it would be a mistake for us to think that that means that Jesus is harmless.

[6 : 19] That Jesus is somehow safe. Jesus is good, and he is utterly trustworthy. But Jesus is not harmless. And when we say that he's shepherd, we're not saying that he's harmless.

Later on in Micah, for example, you don't need to look the passage up, but it's in Micah chapter 5. It's a prophecy speaking of this king who is going to come. And we're told that he will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

His greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. This shepherd who is to come, Jesus who is shepherd, he is a mighty warrior.

Again, we see that kind of language used of him in the New Testament. I saw heaven standing open, and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True.

With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. Jesus is king. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.

[7 : 32] He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood. His name is the word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses dressed in fine linen, white and clean.

Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with a rod of iron. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. If Jesus is shepherd, it means that he is king.

If Jesus is shepherd, it means that he is a mighty warrior. This is possibly very humbling to us, because sometimes we're tempted to disregard Jesus.

Maybe we're tempted to think that Jesus doesn't really matter all that much. But if this is who Jesus is, then he couldn't possibly matter anymore.

[8 : 41] He is the most important person, because he is the king of kings. He is this kind of shepherd. This is humbling, and it's also encouraging, if you belong to Jesus.

Because often you'll face things in your life which you find very difficult. Perhaps there will be things which almost cause you to despair.

Maybe you will face situations in your life. Maybe it's financial difficulties, or maybe it's problems with your health. You may have problems in relationships, and sometimes these problems can seem so overwhelming.

We're filled with anxiety, understandably. But if Jesus is this kind of shepherd, and if he's your shepherd, he is greater than anything that you face.

So this is humbling, but it's also profoundly encouraging. So first of all, when the Bible uses this kind of image, and specifically here in Psalm 80, when God is described as shepherd, and when we describe Jesus as shepherd, we're saying that he's king, and he's a victorious king, a mighty warrior who will defeat all of his enemies.

[10 : 01] The second thing that we notice as we look at this psalm, is that as God is described as shepherd here, the author is looking to the past.

Now, if you look with me at the language that's used here, hear us, shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock, you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, if you look at the language that's used there, it might sound like it's describing things that are currently true.

And the language can sometimes be used that way, that God is now our shepherd. But I would suggest that the way the language is being used in this psalm, it's not actually talking about what God is currently doing.

It's speaking about something that God had done. And in fact, the language that's used here, it could be translated that way. Hear us, you who shepherded Israel, you who led Joseph like a flock, you who were seated enthroned between the cherubim, it could equally be translated that way.

And I would suggest that it should be, that it's talking about something that God had done. There's various reasons for suggesting that. If you notice in verse two, awaken your might.

[11 : 23] Now, when the author, when the psalmist tells God to wake up, obviously he's not suggesting that God was sleeping. He's using figurative language.

And if we look through the rest of the psalm, he makes it very clear that he's not even suggesting that God had been inactive. But nevertheless, if he can use that language, if he can call on God to wake up, it suggests that God isn't currently doing these things, shepherding and leading and reigning in the way that he once had.

Going on from that, notice the language earlier that's used in verse one, you who led Joseph like a flock. Well, you who lead Joseph like a flock, it's translated.

If you look in Psalm 78, there in verse 52, but he brought his people out like a flock, he led them like sheep through the wilderness.

There that language of leading his people like a flock. It's the same language that's used in Psalm 80. In Psalm 78, what's it talking about? He brought out his people like a flock, he led his sheep through the wilderness.

[12 : 41] It's describing the exodus, isn't it? And if you look in Psalm 77, at the very end of it, you led your people in the past, you led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Again, that language, the same language that's used in Psalm 80, it's being used there to talk about the exodus. And one last thing in Psalm 80, and this is maybe the clearest, notice in verse two, what the psalmist asks God to do.

shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh. Well, those were three of the tribes of Israel, weren't they?

There were 12 tribes. Why did the author pick out those three tribes in particular? Did he just randomly pick them? I don't think he randomly picked them.

Earlier, if you go back and look at the account of the exodus, in the book of Numbers, we discover that when the people went out of Egypt, they were told that they were to camp in a certain pattern.

[13 : 53] The Ark of the Covenant, the place where God dwelt symbolically, it was in the center, and there were to be four, sorry, three tribes on either side. So 12 tribes, three of them on either side.

And in Numbers chapter two, in verse 18, it says, on the west will be the divisions of the camp of Ephraim and Manasseh and Benjamin.

The three tribes that are mentioned together in Psalm 80 are mentioned together in Numbers because they were the three tribes that were to camp on the west side of the Ark.

And the other thing, it's not just that when they were encamped that they had a particular order, when they set out, they had a particular order. So later on in the book of Numbers, in Numbers chapter 10, it says in verse 21, then the Kohathites, they were Levites, they are to set out carrying the holy things.

Now, the holy things, that's the Ark, yes, that's the thing that was like God's throne. They were to set out with the Ark of the Covenant. And then in verse 22, the divisions of the camp of Ephraim went next, and then Manasseh, and then Benjamin.

[15 : 22] So coming back to Psalm 80, when the author mentions these three tribes together, there's a reason why he does that. He's mentioning them together because during the Exodus, when God led the people out of Egypt, those were the three tribes that went immediately after the Ark of the Covenant.

This thing with the cherubim on it, which was like God's throne. God was marching with the people, and these three tribes were the ones that went out immediately after him. That's the image that we're being presented with in Psalm 80.

And the author here is asking God to go out with the people as once he had done when he led them out of Egypt. So the language that's being used here describing God as shepherd, it's looking to the past, and it's referring to something that God did before.

And this is actually, it might seem like an insignificant point, this is actually really, really important for us. Because when we say that Jesus is shepherd, it's true that he's at work in our lives now, but it's profoundly important that we recognize what he has already done.

When Jesus, in John's Gospel, when he describes himself as the good shepherd, what is it that he says? I'm the good shepherd, and the good shepherd lays down his life for his people.

[16 : 55] When we say that Jesus is shepherd, shepherd, we're thinking about what he has done. We're thinking about the fact that Jesus gave his life for us.

And that's so important. How can you know, this morning I was suggesting to you that one of the things that it means to acknowledge God, that it means to trust in him. How can you know that you can trust God?

If we take a step back, actually, how can you know that you can trust anybody? If somebody came up to you on the street, you'd never met them before, would you trust them?

No, you wouldn't trust them. You'd be foolish to trust them because they were a stranger. You trust people on the basis of your past experience with them. You trust them, or not, depending on what they've done in the past.

It's not different with God. We trust God because we know what he has done. How can you know that God loves you? Sometimes maybe it doesn't feel like God loves you.

[18 : 05] Sometimes maybe you go through circumstances in your life that would cause you to question whether or not God loves you. Why is he causing this to happen to me if he loves me? How can you know that God loves you?

How can you know that God has forgiven your sins? Sometimes our consciences trouble us, and we wonder how maybe he's not forgiven me. Maybe I've gone too far. How can you be certain that God has forgiven you?

Because of what your shepherd has done for you. In Romans chapter 5, Paul says that God demonstrates his love for us. God proves his love for us in this.

While we were still enemies, Christ died for us. See, Jesus' death is a fact of history. We can know that it happened, and it gives you a firm foundation for you to build your faith on.

And when we say that Jesus is shepherd, we're thinking back to that. We have in mind what our shepherd has done for us in the past.

[19 : 14] So when we say that Jesus is shepherd, we're describing him as king. We're saying, or we should be saying, that he is a mighty warrior.

And also, when we say that Jesus is shepherd, we're thinking to the past about what we know that he's done for us. And then finally, when we describe him as shepherd, it also means that we're looking to the future.

If you come back to Psalm 80, we've been focusing on the beginning of Psalm 80. Psalm 80 was a psalm, you will have noticed this as we read through it.

It was a psalm of people who were going through a period of tremendous difficulty. And they were crying out to God, and they wanted God to put that right.

They wanted God to do something about that. And as we come to the end of the psalm, we see how they thought it was that God would fix that situation. Do you notice the language that they use in verse 18?

[20 : 20] Sorry, verse 17. Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself.

When we look through the psalms at the way that language is used, the man at your right hand, the son of man that you have chosen, that you have raised up for yourself, that was language that was used to describe the king, the son of David who was king of Israel.

But the remarkable thing about Psalm 80, well, look back at Psalm 79. Notice the way that psalm opens.

Oh God, the nations have invaded your inheritance, they have defiled your holy temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.

It gets worse, really. They have left the dead bodies of your servants as food for the birds of the sky, the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild, they have poured out blood like water all around Jerusalem and there was no one to bury the dead.

[21 : 37] When you read Psalm 79, it's maybe more explicit than Psalm 80 and you can understand why these people were so desperate. Jerusalem had been destroyed and the thing that's particularly remarkable in light of what we're considering there in Psalm 80, if you turn forward a little bit to Psalm 89, there in verses 39 and 40 we read, you have renounced the covenant with your servant, you have defiled his crown in the dust, you have broken through all his walls and reduced his strongholds to ruin.

You see, at this point in the Psalms, it's not just that Jerusalem has been destroyed, the king has been destroyed. In verses 43 and 44, indeed you have turned back the edge of his sword, this is talking again about the king, and have not supported him in battle, you have put an end to his splendor and cast his throne to the ground.

See, coming back to Psalm 80, it would have been easy, I suppose, for the people to place their hopes in the son of David if they had a son of David, if they had a king, but the people at this point didn't have a king.

That means that if they could speak in this way and if they could pin their future hopes upon the man at God's right hand, the son of man that he had raised up for himself, if they could speak in that way, it means that they were looking to the future and they were expecting God to do something unheard of, that they were expecting God to intervene in history in a remarkable way.

And if we speak in this way and if we put our hope in Jesus, it means also that we are looking to the future.

[23 : 43] And indeed, in the New Testament, it says at one point in 1 Peter 5, when the chief shepherd appears, that's Jesus, when Jesus comes back, when the chief shepherd appears, you'll receive an unfading crown of glory.

When we describe Jesus as shepherd, it means that we're not just looking to the past, it means that like these people, we're looking to the future for God to act through this king.

Because the most important thing that a shepherd can do is to gather all of his sheep together in their pasture, isn't it? Well, if Jesus is shepherd, if we follow through that metaphor, our pasture is a new heavens and a new earth which God has promised that he will bring about.

And that means that Jesus' work, our shepherd's work, won't be done until he has gathered all of his people into that new creation. We are looking, if we're describing Jesus as shepherd, we're looking at him to act decisively and supernaturally in history.

And these two points, the fact that we look to the past and the fact that we look to the future, they help us to understand what's distinctive about Christianity, isn't it?

[25 : 11] Because imagine you're non-Christian neighbors. Imagine people that you know that don't have any interest in church. I suppose they will think that you go to church because it helps to make you a better person.

And you go to church perhaps because it gives you a sense of peace and it helps you to cope with all of the difficulties that you go through in this life. But maybe they have something else.

You have church, maybe they have yoga. And from their point of view, yoga helps them to be a better person and it helps them to cope with stress. Or maybe they have sports, maybe they go to the gym or they play five-a-side football or they ride their bike.

Or maybe they have music, they go to concerts. Maybe they're involved in charity and that by definition helps them to be a better person and it helps them not to focus on themselves so much and to cope with the difficulties in their lives.

And from their point of view, you have church and that's nice for you, but they have these other things and they don't need church. But the thing is, if we're saying that Jesus is shepherd, then it's not just that Christianity makes us a little bit better in this world.

[26 : 32] I hope that Christianity does make us better. Jesus makes us better. Yes. I hope that it does help you to cope with the difficulties that you go through. But it's not just that. The gospel makes us better people and it helps us to cope with the difficulties of this world because we know what our shepherd has done and because we know what he will do.

And in that sense, Christianity is fundamentally different because it's about what God has done and what God will do in history.

And so when we say that Jesus is shepherd, when this psalm, for example, says that God is shepherd, it means, first of all, that he's king.

He's not any kind of king. He's a king of overwhelming power, a king who defeats all of his enemies. If we say that Jesus is shepherd, then we're looking to the past, to what he has done for us.

And it also means that we're looking forward with anticipation to what he will do for us. And as we close tonight, I'd like to leave you just simply with a question.

[27 : 52] Is this your shepherd? Do you know this Jesus as shepherd? Because he calls you to come to him. He says, my sheep will hear my voice.

He calls you to come. And as you do so, then you can know him as yours. You can know him as the one who acted on your behalf and as the one who will return for you.

Let's close now with prayer. We'll pray. our Father in heaven, we rejoice in your word which you have given to us.

And we pray, Father, that you would be pleased to bless us through your word. Forgive us for how often we have such small thoughts of you. You are a God of overwhelming glory.

glory. And as we consider who you are, we pray, Father, that we would be humbled. And also, though, we ask that you would enable us to rejoice, that we would marvel that we know you, that we know you as the almighty creator of the heavens and the earth, and we know you as our God.

[29 : 06] Enable us to rejoice that we know Jesus as our shepherd, the one who laid down his life for the sheep, and the one who will one day return and gather all of his scattered flock together.

We pray, Father, for Jesus' sake, that you would be pleased to watch over each one of us and that you would bless us. Hear our prayers. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.