

Revelation 7:17

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[0 : 00] Now, I invite you to turn again to that passage that we've read and also just sung, Revelation chapter 7 at verse 17. Revelation 7 at verse 17. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. The Lamb will be the shepherd. In the year 2000, an exhibition was held in the National Gallery of London with the title, Seeing Salvation. It was a millennium exhibition.

And the aim was to show through Christian art over the centuries how artists and painters understood the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. It was done chronologically. You went into the first room, the very early centuries of the Christian era, and went right through. And you can well imagine that the largest room and the greatest number of exhibits was to do with the famous Renaissance paintings, scenes from Jesus' life, His childhood, His ministry, His crucifixion, His burial, His resurrection, and so on. But I must say that for me, visiting that exhibition then, the very first room was the most impressive and the most moving. It was very small. There wasn't very much in it because it referred to the first few centuries of the Christian era. And largely, it was drawings that had come from the catacombs in Rome, those underground burial chambers where Christians were forced to worship in hiding, chased by their persecutors in those dreadful days. And the commonest theme in those drawings, those early drawings, were pictures of a lamb, normally laid on an altar, and of a shepherd. There was no attempt to portray Jesus as later artists did, try and imagine His human form. None of that. The lamb and the shepherd. The shepherd usually with a lamb or sheep on his shoulder, and two others, one on each side. Obviously, being brought to the is theicians of File 150, one on the spreading of heaven, represent the holy image Sunday. So, one on the daily basis is one of the freshenes thatritioned Noah ■■■ity, and one on each side that is one of the locations of priests, and one on thezanos of the throne. Amen. Now, mann the angels and of the redeemed in our text here. The lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. Actually, literally, it's not a noun, a shepherd, it's a verb. The lamb will shepherd them or will feed them. You can see the connection, for example, if you think of pasture, he will take them to pastures, he will pasture them or be their pastor, their shepherd.

Now, when you stop to think about it, this is a very, very strange notion. The shepherd, at the same time, is a lamb. The lamb has become a shepherd. But how can that be? How can a shepherd at the same time be a sheep? And how can a sheep be transformed into a shepherd? And yet that is what we have here in this text, which takes us, actually, the shepherd, who is also a lamb, takes us to the very heart of Christian teaching and Christian experience. And I want to develop this theme by noticing, first of all, that the shepherd who becomes a lamb is of us, one of us.

[5 : 05] And then secondly, the shepherd who becomes a lamb is for us. And thirdly, the shepherd who becomes a lamb is with us. So the shepherd who becomes a lamb is of us. Picture in your minds a field of sheep, springtime, springtime, green pastures. But there's a lamb on the edge of the flock, briskly gambling along, obviously an inquisitive type of lamb, because it goes further and further away from the rest of the flock. Away on at the edge of the field, he's enjoying some juicy pasture. And before you know it, he's through a hedge, he's through a hedge, and he's on the other side, where the grass, of course, is always greener. And for a time, it works beautifully. But then the sun is hidden behind clouds, and the rain begins to fall, and the wind begins to blow. And the lamb decides, time to get home again, time to get back to the safety of the fold. But it's disorientated. It tries here and there and everywhere, but it's out of reach. And then, to make a bad situation worse, the lamb stumbles, slips down a slope, and ends up in a deep crevasse, bruised and battered. And to increase the poor lamb's distress, it hears a howling. The howling gets nearer. It's a howling of a wolf, and no doubt its mother had warned it in sheep language, to beware of wolves. And there it is, consumed with fear, all battered, all bruised, all pained, all distressed. And suddenly, the shepherd appears.

And the shepherd, giving confidence, of course, to the lamb, the shepherd says to the trembling sheep, relax. Take it easy. You're all right. I understand. I've been there where you are. I've been in your skin. I know. Well, of course, that's fanciful, isn't it? Fairy tale stuff. A shepherd can't speak to a sheep like that. The sheep can't understand. Yet, here it is. The shepherd becomes a lamb.

The lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. Or to put it, as I've said, that this figure gives us the whole heart of Christian teaching. So, to put it in theological and biblical language, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. Or again, the same writer who has given us this in Revelation, gave it to us in the gospel that I've just quoted in the first letter of John, that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched. This we proclaim concerning the Word of life, the Word of God. The Word appeared. The shepherd became a lamb, one of us. And of course, we have this concept all through Scripture, long before the Lord Jesus came here to earth. For we read of our Lord that in all their afflictions, He was afflicted. And we read, too, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, that Jesus had to be made like His brothers in every way, because He Himself suffered when He was tempted. He is able to help those who are being tempted. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin. And so, we have the reality of the incarnation.

The shepherd becomes a lamb. And this is very strikingly and beautifully portrayed, foreshadowed, in the words of the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 34, which deals exclusively with shepherds and sheep.

We read, this is what the sovereign Lord says at verse 11 of chapter 34, "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them, or as Revelation has it, I will feed them, be their shepherd on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down," declares the sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak." So here is a shepherd incarnate as a sheep. But there's actually more to this concept than what we see in the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, because Peter himself writing many years later. Peter tells us that the Lord Jesus bore our sins in his own body on the tree, but he then goes on to say that in doing so, he left us an example so that we should follow in his steps.

[12:25] The incarnation is unique. Only the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God, could have become incarnate as Jesus did. And yet it challenges us that we too would have the heart of the shepherd, we who are sheep, and that we would have a concern, the shepherd's concern, for those who are wandering, suffering sheep. Think of Job in all his afflictions. Think of when his friends who came to him with the best of theology, except that it wasn't applicable to him. And think of Job in his agony crying out in chapter 16, you are all miserable comforters. And he goes on to say, if you were in my place, then you would understand. Or in the words of the authorized version, if your soul were in my soul's stead. You see what he's saying? Here I am, like that little lamb we've imagined. Here I am, battered, bruised, mocked, like a lost wandering sheep. And friends, don't you care? Can't you feel for me? And that's what the Apostle Paul goes on to say, isn't it, when he gives us that great figure of the church as a body, the body of which Christ is a head. And he tells us in 1 Corinthians 12, if one member suffers, all members suffer with it. And in Hebrews 13, so very relevant in these terrible times in which we live, when so many of the Lord's people are being brutally slaughtered, where the writer says, remember those in bonds, as bound together with them, bearing in mind that you also are in the body. Although you're living in comfort and ease, yet in your body, some or other in your spirit, you feel their pain. The shepherd is of us.

But this concept of the shepherd, who is also a lamb, means that the shepherd is for us. In chapter 5 of Revelation, in another of the great songs of that book, chapter 5, verse 6, we see that it was not in one of the songs, but it's in John's vision, chapter 5, verse 6, then I saw a lamb looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne. That's what we're told about the lamb, who is acting as a shepherd. Here's the lamb looking as if it had been slain.

And of course, the lamb was slain. And what John must have seen in his vision, so that he could say that, would have been the marks, the nail marks on the hands and on the feet. And of course, he would appreciate so fully that the lamb truly slain was then the one who had brought their redemption, his redemption, the redemption of all the people of God. For back in chapter 7, in that song that we read, verse 14, we're told that these are they who've come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. The lamb, who is the shepherd, who is the shepherd and becomes one of us, that lamb shed his precious blood. And that we might become part of his flock, we need, as stated here, to be washed in the blood of the lamb. The lamb, the shepherd, became a lamb and was slain for us. He is of us. He was slain for us. As Paul tells us in Galatians 2.20, I have been crucified with Christ. Nevertheless, I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me and the life that I now live in the flesh. I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. And John and everyone else, who knew God's Word and God's dealings with his ancient people, would immediately think when he sees the lamb as it had been slain, of those lambs that down through Israel's history were taken at Passover time and slain for every family that they might be spared, the punishment of sin.

The daily lamb, the daily lamb, morning and evening, lambs laid upon the altar. And there in Leviticus chapter 1, it paints a picture of the guilty Israelite bringing his spotless lamb, the best of his flock, and there he lays his hand upon the lamb. And the priest, you know, would then take the blood and sprinkle it upon the altar within the court. I lay my sins on Jesus, the spotless lamb of God.

[18 : 19] He bears them all and frees me from the accursed load. He was made sin for us. He who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. And again, thinking of that lamb in the Old Testament sacrificial system, it would be the priest who would then bring the sacrificial blood. It would be the priest that would come with the offering. But not here, not a human priest, not one of Levi's blind, but the shepherd himself. He comes and he offers himself as the sacrifice. The shepherd becomes the lamb. And it had to be so. These men, some of them good men, many of them sadly not, the priests of Israel, obedient to what God had revealed as to the need of sacrifice for the atonement of sin. They were but men. They died one after another, and it needed the last, the great high priest, also the shepherd, because not all the blood of bulls and goats on Jewish altars slain could give the guilty sinner peace or wash away sin or peace or wash away the stain. And we here tonight, we accept,

I trust we all do, we accept that we need this offering and that for ourselves we receive this offering and then that we know that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin. And though that may occur in a moment, yet it is for life, for life in its entirety, as, and I quote again from Revelation, as you and I follow the lamb wherever he goes. And as we remember the words of the good shepherd himself, my sheep, my sheep hear my voice, and they follow me, however stony the path, however stormy the sky.

So the shepherd is of us, the shepherd who becomes a lamb. The shepherd who becomes a lamb is for us.

But the shepherd who becomes a lamb is also with us. Now thinking back to the catacombs in Rome, in some of the pictures that we saw in that exhibition, the lamb was either dead, portrayed as dead, or about to be killed, laying on the altar.

[21 : 33] But in perhaps more of the pictures, you saw the lamb actually standing on the altar with a crown with a crown or a halo above its head and a scepter in its hand or in its paw.

So here, again, is the marvelous picture of the lamb that was dead, but is now alive and triumphant. And indeed, in all that I've been saying, you have the whole heart of Christian teaching, what we are as Christians, what the whole of our Christian faith is about. The shepherd who is a lamb is of us, that's incarnation. The shepherd who is a lamb is for us, that's atonement. The shepherd who becomes a lamb is with us, that's resurrection and newness of life. And of course, the prophet Isaiah, he foretold that, both aspects of it, the lamb that died and came to life again. When in Isaiah 53, we read the well-known words, he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.

And though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering. Now, notice this. That's his death, his atoning death. But then it goes on to say, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. He was dead, dead for us on the cross of Calvary, but he lives. And

so, the slain lamb, the lamb that is also a shepherd feeding the people of God, is also the lamb that we read about in another of the songs, chapter 17, there at verse 14, where we read that the enemies of God, they will make war against the lamb, but the lamb will overcome them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. And notice this, and with him as Lord and King, and with him will be his called, the flock, you, and I too. If we trust in Jesus, we are with him as called, chosen, and faithful followers.

So, think again of those Christians 2,000 years ago, huddled in the cold, damp, gloomy catacombs, those underground burial chambers of ancient Rome, in fear of their lives, and deeply aware that the words that they knew from Scripture, words in the book of Psalms, but also quoted by the Apostle Paul, that they applied so very appropriately and sadly to them, for your sake, we face death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered, Psalm 44.

[25 : 12] And of course, in the world's view, the authorities there in Rome that were harrying them and putting many of them to death, in their view, these Christians, these poor Christians, their leader was equally helpless, just a sheep to be slaughtered. And then, in those grim circumstances, there comes this word from heaven, the Lamb in the midst of the throne, the Lamb in whose shed blood you have been washed and made clean. He is the Lamb that goes forth conquering and to conquer.

And that was true for them, and it's true today. Whether it's our brothers and sisters in Christ who in their thousands who in their thousands are being slaughtered like those sheep of whom we read by Al-Qaeda or Boko Haram or Islamic State or Al-Shabaab, the Lamb in the midst of the throne, He is their shepherd, even in the midst of all their agonies and all their pain.

And their present experience is well described. Going back again to Ezekiel 34, I read from verse 11, but at the beginning of the chapter, there's a very different picture, a much shorter one.

Verse 4, speaking of other shepherds, you have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You've not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You've ruled over them brutally and harshly. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains, and on every high hill they were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

But then there's this word that we already read, the sovereign Lord says, I myself will search for my sheep and look after them as a shepherd looks after his scattered flock.

[27 : 42] Now, we're not in that situation. Those of the believers in Rome persecuted by the emperor, by Nero and others, nor these of whom we think so much these days, likewise being persecuted. But we all have our own trials. You do in your own life, perhaps in your job, perhaps in your family, perhaps in relationships, perhaps in health or the health of loved ones. And then there comes to you the same promise that the shepherd who became a lamb, he will feed you, he will pasture you. He's doing it all the time. He'll do it through his own word, feed you through his word read, his word preached, his word lived out, and through his indwelling spirit. Isn't it wonderful that the shepherd who became a lamb is of us, is for us, is with us? But before I close, if I've to be faithful to God's word, there's something else that needs to be added. Because the Lord Jesus, the shepherd, who as we see is the conquering king of kings and lord of lords, he is also the judge of all the earth. And it's Jesus himself who painted another picture, one that will truly happen, not just a picture, but an event that lies ahead of us at the end of time when he comes back. And he is king, as judge. Shepherd, yes, but as king and judge, he will sit upon his throne, and all nations, we're told, will be gathered before him. Every single person, you and I included, will be there. No escape.

And we're told, as we've been told in Revelation, that there are those who will cry out, hide us from the wrath of the lamb. And Jesus tells us that on that day, the king, the shepherd king, upon his throne, he will put some on his right hand and some on his left. And to those on his right hand, he'll say, come, you blessed of my father. And to those on his left hand, he will say, depart from me, you cursed. How can we know that the shepherd who became a lamb will say the first words to us? Let me close with a story. The year is 1956. And in that year, there was an uprising in Hungary against Soviet oppression. Sadly, the Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest, and the uprising was crushed.

And many, many were killed, imprisoned, forced into exile. It so happened that that summer, I was attending a student camp in Germany. The leader of the camp, who gave us the talks every evening, was a Swiss, a German-speaking Swiss. And his wife was Hungarian.

And so, what was happening in Hungary was very real and very painful to them. And during that camp, we were told this story from Hungary. It was after, just after, I think, the revolution was crushed.

[31 : 55] It was about a bishop who wanted to go to a very small German-speaking area of Hungary and encourage his flock. My guess is, I don't know, my guess is that he was probably a Lutheran bishop, willing to ask the authorities for permission. And maybe for diplomatic reasons, they allowed him to go to go, but with strict instructions not to have any religion when he spoke to the people.

No Bible, no hymns, no prayers. So, he accepted that and met with a certain place, town, village. He met with quite a crowd of people, and he greeted them. And then he said to them, this evening, I want to speak to you about the alphabet. I don't know what he said, stories about how alphabets were formed, and different alphabets, and the Hungarian or the German alphabets, who knows. And then he said, I wonder what you think is the most important letter in the alphabet. Well, somebody would have said A, the first letter. Maybe someone else, X. X marks the spot where the treasure is hidden.

Whatever. And then he said, no, for me, the most important letter is M. Now, at the back of the hall, everybody knew there were members of the secret police listening to all that was happening, ready to arrest them at a moment's notice. He said, the most important letter is M. And he picked up a book beside him on the lectern, probably a Bible, I suppose. And he said, this, friends, what is it? It's just a book. It's just a book. Could be anybody's book. If it's just a book, what does it say? I don't know if I know what it says. And I couldn't take it away from here. It's just a book. Could be anybody's book. Ah, but friends, if I add the letter M, ein Buch, a book, becomes mein Buch, my book.

Ah, he said, isn't that different? Then I take this book, and it's my book, and I can read it, and I know what it says. And it's got wonderful stories in it about people who were in great trouble, and they were delivered, and I can feel what they go through. And it tells wonderful stories of families who were made very happy, and I can have it with me when I leave this place, and I'm feeling sad. I can read my book whenever I want. And then he said to them, look out the window. What do you see? On the other side of the street, there was a house, and someone said, ein Haus. So he said, that's right, but it's just a house. It's not a house I can go into. It's not a house any of you can go into. I'm sure if I went into that house tonight, went in the door and sat down, that the gentleman in the back row, they would arrest me quite right too, because I would be a thief and a robber. It's just a house. [35 : 46] But if it's my house, you see how easy German is? Mein Haus. If it's my house, I can go in, and my wife will be there. She'll have a lovely hot meal for me, and I can sit down beside the fire, and my children can come on my knee, and I can take my book, and I can read them. I can read them great stories about how children were made happy, and how people who were sad were made glad, and how people who were afraid that they were able to get strength. And it's my book in my house.

And then in one more example, he said, as I was coming along tonight, there was a flock of sheep, and there was a man with them. Now, you know who the man was. Probably most of you know him personally. He was ein Hirt. Now, that's the German for shepherd, but she heard, hirt. Well, he was ein Hirt. He was a shepherd. But I didn't know him. He may have been a rascal for all I know. He may have been ready to steal the sheep. If anything happened, if the wolf came, he might have run away. I don't know. He's just a shepherd. But if we put the letter M in there, it's mein Hirt, my shepherd. And lots of you, you probably know him. Maybe some of you, you've got some of those sheep, and he's a friend of yours, and he was looking after them. And you know him. And you know that he loves the sheep, that he calls them all by name. And you know that if there's danger, he'll look after them. He'll even lay down his life for the sheep. Isn't that a wonderful letter?

The letter M? And he finishes talk. Well, you and I know that believers there in that hall would have gone home comforted and encouraged. They couldn't take out Bibles, but they knew of whom the Bible spoke. And when I heard the story first, I wondered if any of these secret service men, oppressing the people of God, believing that religion is the opium of the people, if a seed was maybe sown there, who can tell that bore fruit in days to come?

And you and I, as we stand before that throne of judgment, if we know that the one on the throne is my shepherd, my Lord, my King. And you can know that because when he came to earth, and when he began his public ministry, the very first thing he said was, repent and believe the gospel.

And if you've repented, turn from your sin to Jesus Christ as Savior. If you've believed the good news that God sent his own Son who died for sinners, and as you trust in him, you receive the gift of eternal life. And he says, I know my sheep, and they will never perish. Then on that great day, the shepherd who is a judge, he'll be your friend, and you'll hear him say, come, you blessed of my Father.

[39 : 21] And you and I tonight, we can sing, I hope you can sing from the heart, our closing psalm, the Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want it. Yea, though I walk in death's dark veil, yet will I fear no ill.

Goodness and mercy all my life will surely follow me. Thank God for the shepherd who became a lamb. He is of us. He is for us. He is with us. Let's then close by singing Psalm 23.