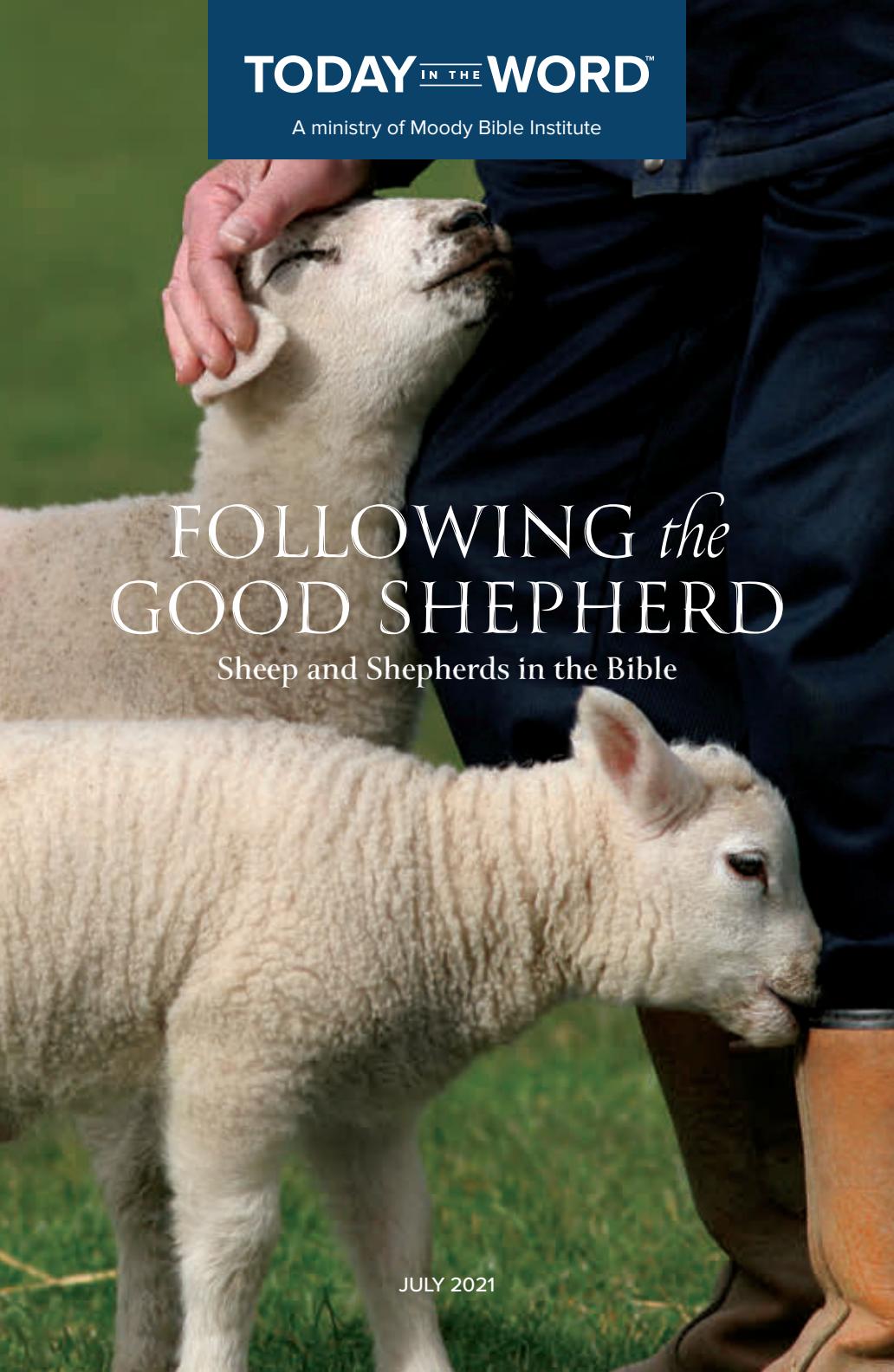


**TODAY** IN THE **WORD**™

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute



# FOLLOWING *the* GOOD SHEPHERD

Sheep and Shepherds in the Bible

JULY 2021

# Your Shepherd for Every Season

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

*“Because the Lord is our shepherd, we do not walk through this life on our own. The Lord is our defender, provider, and guide.”*



Very few of us have had up-close experience with shepherds, but Caleb Fetterhoff has. For the past five years, this Moody

Bible Institute grad has lived and served among the shepherds of Lesotho in South Africa. In this rural, mountainous country, school age boys earn their living as “herd boys.”

A shepherd’s life can be grueling. They are constantly moving, enduring harsh temperatures. In the summer, they guide the flock through pasturelands, at least a 12-hour walk to the nearest village. Because of this, the shepherds appreciate community. Sitting by a fire, they tell stories, and Caleb is able to share about God. Summers bring opportunities for evangelism as they see the same people for a brief time. In the winter, the sheep are kept in corrals near the village, which allows missionaries to build deeper relationships with the young shepherds.

Often called *The Shepherd’s Psalm*, Psalm 23 is probably the most famous passage in all of Scripture.

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not

want” (v. 1 KJV). It is no wonder that this psalm has comforted so many. Because the Lord is our shepherd, we do not walk through this life on our own. The Lord is our defender, provider, and guide. And, because the Lord is my shepherd, “I shall not want” or, as translated in the NIV, “I lack nothing” (v. 1). What a powerful, life-changing statement! The Lord does not just care for us when we seek Him or when we are at church. We have a shepherd who is always looking out for us. He guides us through times of joy but also when the troubles of life close in. In every situation and every place, God is present. And because He is present, we lack nothing.

Caleb said, “God’s been teaching me the importance of perseverance. Sometimes we have dry spells where we feel like God is distant. We persevere and do what we know to be obedient. But I’ve also been learning about resting on God’s promises. God is working, even while we are doing.”

Friend, we have the best shepherd of all. He is always with us, guiding us toward safety and away from danger. He provides for all our needs. He saves us when we fall. He shows us the best path forward. With our shepherd is the very best place we can be. ■

# The Ideal Leader

by Dr. John Koessler

*“Shepherds and their sheep have mutual responsibility.*

*The church’s shepherds are to lead like Jesus.*

*And the sheep are to hold their leaders in high regard.”*

If you were asked to name an inspirational leader, whom would you name? Perhaps you might mention a personal mentor or a great leader from history. But for those in the church, our ultimate role model is Jesus Christ. Jesus is called the Chief Shepherd in 1 Peter 5:4. And although this term appears only once in the New Testament, it is worth noting. Jesus is the ultimate Shepherd, the One who all church leaders should imitate and the One to whom they will be held accountable.

In recent days, the news has featured disturbing accounts of notable church leaders who have abused their responsibility. Some have been accused of bullying those under their charge. Some were more interested in taking care of themselves than in protecting and guiding their flock. Jesus compared such leaders to a “hired hand” who doesn’t own the sheep and so is unwilling to risk his life to protect them (John 10:12). In Ezekiel 34, the prophet speaks against false shepherds who enriched themselves at the expense of those

under their guidance. These “false shepherds” may think that they lead but their actions prove otherwise (John 10:13).

These examples stand in sharp contrast with Jesus, who calls Himself the Good Shepherd (v. 11). During His time on earth, Jesus set an example of self-sacrifice, even to the point of death (vv. 11, 15). Jesus demonstrated sacrificial love for those under His care (v. 14). As the Chief Shepherd, Jesus will one day call all leaders to give an account for their actions (Heb. 13:17). Those who follow Christ’s example and serve the church faithfully will be rewarded with a “crown of glory that will never fade away” (1 Peter 5:4). Those who violate their leadership trust will lose this reward. The apostle Paul warns that “their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light” (1 Cor. 3:13).

Shepherds and their sheep have mutual responsibility. The church’s shepherds are to lead like Jesus. And the sheep are to hold their leaders in high regard. Both must give an account to Christ (Heb. 13:7, 17). ■

## For Further Study

To learn more, read *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* by Timothy S. Laniak (InterVarsity).

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

**WEEK 1:** What skills did David learn in his vocation as a shepherd? How did they turn out to be useful in his battle against Goliath? (July 2)

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**WEEK 2:** What skills developed in your ordinary life might God use for a future step of faith?

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**WEEK 3:** What do you think it was like for the Shepherd to become one of the sheep? (July 8)

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**WEEK 4:** Sheep are prone to wander (July 12-13). So are we! How can we better train our own hearts toward faithfulness?

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Want more questions? Check out the Go Deeper section on our website or app!

# TODAY IN THE WORD™

## Following the Good Shepherd

*I am the good shepherd.*

*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.—John 10:11*

If someone called you a “sheep,” you might be insulted. Well, then, consider yourself warned, because this month we’ll learn that we are all sheep—weak, foolish, and prone to wander.

Thankfully, the complementary truth in Scripture is that God is our Shepherd (Ps. 23:1) and Jesus is our Good Shepherd (John 10:14). My prayer is that through this study we will:

- Understand the meaning of sheep and shepherds in Scripture.
- Trust and rejoice in God as our Shepherd, including Christ, our Good Shepherd.
- Celebrate God’s plan of redemption through Christ, the perfect sacrificial and conquering Lamb.

Your fellow sheep,



Bradley Baurain

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# The Lord Is My Shepherd

Read Psalm 23

*I will fear no evil, for you are with me.—Psalm 23:4*

According to one Bible app, the most popular verse of 2020 was Isaiah 41:10: “Do not fear, for I am with you.” In 2019, it was Philippians 4:6: “Do not be anxious about anything.” In 2018, it was also Isaiah 41:10, and in 2017, it was Joshua 1:9: “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

Clearly, our lives in this fallen world are dominated by fear and worry. Our only genuine source of hope is God. Thankfully, those who follow God have the Lord as our Shepherd. Sheep and shepherds are our topic of Bible study this month. Throughout Scripture, sheep, shepherds, and flocks are mentioned a combined 500 times! In fact, sheep are the most frequently mentioned animals in the Bible.

Psalm 23 encourages us with at least three truths about God as our Shepherd. First, He provides all we need: “I lack nothing” (v. 1). This doesn’t mean our wish list is His agenda. God’s provision for us is

based on His wisdom and sovereign purposes. But as His sheep, we can be sure His “goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life” (v. 6).

Second, “He guides me along the right paths” (v. 3). This requires both knowledge of righteousness and practical wisdom to choose it in our daily lives. This is “for his name’s sake”—His glory is always the primary purpose. Finally, God is always with us (v. 4). This is true even and especially in the darkest valleys or circumstances. His presence means we need fear no evil. Many generations of believers have claimed this powerful promise. Notice how the psalmist refers to God directly as “you” here. This truth was very personal for him!

► Which verse of this psalm best describes your current circumstances? Are you enjoying green pastures? Or, are you in the depths of a dark valley? In either case, rejoice and trust in God’s loving care.

## Pray with Us

Oh Lord our Shepherd, calm our hearts with the truths that David proclaims. In Your wisdom You provide all we need, guiding us in righteousness and dwelling with us through both dark and peaceful times.

# Shepherds and Giants

## Read 1 Samuel 17

*The battle is the Lord's.—1 Samuel 17:47*

The first shepherd in Scripture, Abel, was also the first murder victim (see Genesis 4). In the first five books of the Old Testament, a shepherd was a common occupation. We meet Jacob, whose flocks God greatly blessed (Gen. 31:4–9). Moses was taking care of sheep in Midian when God met him in the burning bush (Exodus 3). But the most famous biblical shepherd was King David, who watched over his family's flocks (Ps. 78:70–72).

The skills David learned while shepherding helped him face the giant Goliath. As the youngest son, he was charged with tending the sheep (v. 15) and running errands. When he arrived at the Israelite army's encampment with bread and cheese for his brothers, he was dismayed to hear Goliath's scornful challenge. God's name was being tarnished by the enemy's boastful insults as well as the Israelites' cowardice and lack of faith. When he inquired about the situation, though, his brother Eliab angrily mocked him as an irrelevant shepherd boy (v. 28).

Nonetheless, David volunteered to face Goliath. He told King Saul that as a shepherd he had experience protecting the flock from bears and lions (vv. 34–37). His slingshot was a serious weapon (see Judg. 20:16). The stones he picked up from the stream were not the pebbles depicted by Sunday School illustrations (v. 40). Each rock was the size of a baseball and weighed about nine ounces. Skilled users could launch them at up to 100–150 miles per hour!

David's faith, though, was not in his weapons or his abilities but in God. "The battle is the Lord's," he proclaimed (vv. 45–47). Then he stunned the giant and chopped off his head with his own sword. The Israelites took courage, followed his example, and won the battle!

► Dealing with problems and challenges in our own strength is a recipe for disaster. Like David, we should face whatever challenge each day brings with the cry, "The battle is the Lord's."

### Pray with Us

Almighty God, grant us David's fervent reverence for Your name. May we also be motivated by the desire to glorify You, and to proclaim the truth so that others will join us in singing Your praises.

# God, the Shepherd of Israel

## Read Ezekiel 34

*You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture,  
and I am your God.—Ezekiel 34:31*

In ancient Palestine, caring for sheep looked different from what we see today. According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, “Sheep were not fenced in and left to fend for themselves. Instead they were totally dependent on shepherds for protection, grazing, watering, shelter and tending to injuries. . . . Sheep are not only dependent creatures; they are also singularly unintelligent, prone to wandering and unable to find their way to a sheepfold even when it is within sight.”

This is the cultural background for God’s condemnation of false shepherds in today’s reading. Metaphorically, “shepherds” were the nation’s leaders, especially kings and priests. Instead of watching over the sheep (v. 4), they’d acted irresponsibly and unjustly. Instead of taking care of the flock, they’d taken care of themselves (v. 2). As a result, the people were lost, confused, and easy targets for predators.

To fix this problem, God promised that He would be the nation’s

shepherd (vv. 11–16, 30–31). He would act with love, protecting and providing for the sheep. He would also act with justice. He would pay attention to the vulnerable—helping the weak and injured, finding the lost—as well as opposing the proud and powerful. “The sleek and the strong I will destroy” (v. 16) shows that God’s justice will be meted out to those who oppress and exploit the weak. They’re pictured as rams or goats who trample the grass and muddy the water to spoil the grazing, and in general bully the other sheep (vv. 17–22).

Ultimately, God would keep His promise by placing over the people one Shepherd from the line of David (v. 23). This Messianic prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Under His new “covenant of peace” there will be “showers of blessing” (vv. 25–26)!

► In this chapter, a key distinctive of biblical justice is whether power is used for one’s own benefit or for the good of others. How might we pursue such justice in our own communities?

### Pray with Us

Show us the ministry You have given us and convict us of ways we have failed to uphold Your justice. Lord, forgive us for abusing authority and soften our hearts toward the weak and defenseless.

# Hear Us, O Shepherd!

## Read Psalm 80

*Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.—Psalm 80:19*

A famous hymn, often sung to a Welsh or Irish tune, celebrates God as our Shepherd: “The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never. I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine forever. Where streams of living water flow, my ransomed soul he leadeth; and where the verdant pastures grow, with food celestial feedeth.”

In today’s psalm, the entire prayer is framed by the comparison of God as Shepherd: “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.” In neighboring psalms, the title “Shepherd” refers particularly to God’s past guidance of His people through the wilderness to the promised land (see Pss. 77:20; 78:52).

Notice the contrast in verse one. God is described as a shepherd and then, in the second half of verse 1, as “You who sit enthroned between the cherubim.” This may seem puzzling, but in Ancient Near Eastern culture “shepherd” was also a metaphor for “king.” God is portrayed as both our loving and faithful

shepherd and our just, powerful, sovereign, and glorious King.

God’s character provides many reasons for praise and petition. In Psalm 80, the main request is “restore us,” alongside the priestly blessing, “make your face shine on us” (repeated in vv. 3, 7, 19). To put this in historical context, Assyria had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. Even though the nation was now divided and Judah remained free, part of God’s people were enduring great suffering.

The psalmist prays that the entire nation will return to the Lord and receive His favor and blessing (v. 18). While at the time they were drinking “tears by the bowlful” (v. 5), they remembered how God had liberated them from slavery, provided for them in the wilderness, and prospered them in their new home (vv. 8–10).

► Today’s psalm is one of a cluster that includes lots of sheep and shepherd imagery. If you have a bit of extra time this week, also read Psalms 74, 77, 78, and 79.

### Pray with Us

Father, sometimes our circumstances may persuade us that You have abandoned us. In moments of doubt, remind us of Psalm 80 so that we remember Your promises. Bolster our faith with Your faithfulness to Israel.

# The Messiah as a Shepherd

**Read Micah 5:1–9**

*He will stand and shepherd his flock  
in the strength of the LORD.—Micah 5:4*

For about seven years, Moody Bible Institute graduate Caleb Fetterhoff has been living and ministering to semi-nomadic shepherds high in the mountains of Lesotho in southern Africa. These shepherds care for flocks that belong to wealthy owners down in the valleys. Their lifestyle put them beyond the reach of local churches, so Caleb lives as one of them in order to reach them with the gospel. In March 2020, he baptized a group of new believers!

Caleb is following in the footsteps of our Messiah, the Good Shepherd. The initial word in today's reading was not good. The nation of Judah would be conquered by Babylon, as conveyed by the picture of her ruler being struck on the cheek (v. 1). But immediately the prophet countered this bad news with a hope-filled promise from the Lord: One day a very different Ruler will come. He would be born in Bethlehem from the line of David, although His "origins" would be even older (v. 2). This Ruler

"will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God" (v. 4).

Clearly this is a Messianic prophecy (see Matt. 2:6) about the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He will be the ideal shepherd or the perfect king. He will do what kings should do, what Israelite rulers failed to do—protect, provide for, and care for the people. The Messiah will deliver the nation from her enemies and keep the "remnant," true believers, safe (Micah 5:5–9). He will win the victory and "be our peace" (v. 5). Again, the Hebrew word here is *shalom*, indicating holistic well-being.

► Read more about Caleb and the Good Shepherd in this month's president's column. What does an ideal shepherd or leader look like today? What qualities or virtues should they possess? In what specific ways can we strive to be Christlike leaders?

## Pray with Us

Lord, we pray that You would sustain and nurture those like Caleb Fetterhoff who have ventured into remote places, isolated from Your church, to plant new churches where Your name is not known.

# The Coming Shepherd

Read **Isaiah 40:1–11**

*He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.—Isaiah 40:11*

Many famous paintings have pictured Jesus as the Good Shepherd, carrying a lamb over His shoulders or in His arms. In fact, some of the earliest artistic depictions of Jesus found in the Catacombs of Rome portray Him not on a cross, but as a shepherd. Today's reading is another prophecy in which the Messiah is pictured as both a shepherd and a king. Here, God's prophet delivered a word of "comfort" (repeated twice for emphasis) in the midst of suffering—meaning the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests (vv. 1–2).

We hear from three voices. First, a "voice" prepares the way, clearing the road for the arrival of the King (vv. 3–5). As we know from reading the Gospels, this prophecy was fulfilled by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:1–6). The second "voice" is a reminder that "the word of our God endures forever" (vv. 6–8). Grass withers, flowers fade, people are imperfect. But God is the opposite.

He is infinite, eternal, and perfectly holy and faithful. He keeps all His promises. For this reason, He is the only genuine source of comfort!

Finally, one more voice proclaims from a mountaintop, "Here is your God!" (vv. 9–11). The King has arrived! His power is awesome. The nations will be completely unable to stand against Him. Yet at the same time, His rule will be characterized by a shepherd's gentleness and love (v. 11; see Jer. 31:10). He will take the lambs—the weakest and most vulnerable sheep—into His arms, carry them close to His heart, and lead them to life everlasting.

► The Jewish people needed these precious word of comfort. And so do we today! Sinners need the good news that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). If you've never done so, we urge you to trust Him today for salvation!

## Pray with Us

Today we intercede for the frail in faith. God, revive those who waver on the edge of unbelief. Carry those who lack the strength to cling to You. You are the Shepherd who loves the vulnerable and weak.

# Shepherds at the Incarnation

Read Luke 2:8–20

*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.—Luke 2:18*

The pilot episode for *The Chosen*, a popular television series depicting the life of Christ, tells the story of Simon, a poor, lame shepherd. Simon longs for the coming of the Messiah. One day, he encounters Mary and Joseph and kindly gives her a drink of water. That very night, angels visit Simon and his fellow shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus. They joyfully go to find the child and Simon is healed!

The Christmas story is for everyone, even and especially for those counted lowest in society. And that was certainly true of the shepherds in Jesus' day. One might think that when the Messiah arrived, the "important people" would be the first to know this history-making news. But God does not show favoritism, and in His world the last shall be first (Luke 13:30; Acts 10:34–35). We shouldn't be surprised, then, that shepherds were chosen as the first to receive Jesus' birth announcement (vv. 8–14). God sent an entire choir of angels to sing them the wonderful news!

In light of this month's study, it seems fitting that shepherds were the first to be told of the coming of the Good Shepherd. These particular shepherds provide a model response in at least three ways: First, they responded in faith to what they'd heard and went to find the child (vv. 15–16). Second, they rejoiced at what they'd heard and seen and spread the good news to others (vv. 17–18). Finally, they gave praise and glory to the Lord for all of it (v. 20).

Many Bible scholars believe these shepherds were watching over special flocks—animals used for the temple sacrifices. In that case, there's a double appropriacy here: Those taking care of the must-repeat sacrificial animals were the first to learn that the perfect, once-for-all Sacrifice had come!

► Yes, we know it's summer, but why not listen to your favorite Christmas music today? Music that celebrates the coming of our Savior should always be in season!

## Pray with Us

God in heaven, we are those on whom Your favor rests. Like the shepherds in Luke, we celebrate the good news of Christ's birth, proclaimed to lowly people like ourselves. May the whole world know what You have done!

# Behold, the Lamb of God!

Read John 1:29–42

*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!—John 1:29*

In William Blake's poem "The Lamb," a child asks the small creature, "Dost thou know who made thee?" The answer is found in the second stanza: "He is calléd by thy name, For he calls himself a Lamb: He is meek and he is mild, He became a little child: I a child and thou a lamb, We are calléd by his name."

Interestingly, in the Gospels only one person called Jesus the "Lamb of God": John the Baptist (vv. 29, 36). What did John mean when he gave Jesus this title? First, Jesus would be the perfect sacrifice "who takes away the sin of the world" (cf. 1 John 2:2). In addition, he may have known that Jesus would fulfill the symbolism of the Passover lamb (see July 24). Just as that lamb's blood on the doorposts saved the Israelites' lives, so also Jesus' blood would bring redemption to the world.

Through God's direct revelation (v. 33) John learned that Jesus was the Messiah and that he was to be the

forerunner, preparing the way (v. 30). The entire purpose of John's ministry was to reveal Jesus (v. 31). When he baptized Jesus, God publicly showed His approval (v. 32). Jesus was indeed "God's Chosen One" or the "Son of God" (v. 34)!

John specifically pointed out Jesus to two of his own disciples: Andrew and, according to tradition, John. This was his way of encouraging them to follow Jesus (v. 37). Andrew went and told Peter (v. 41) who also chose to follow Jesus. Most leaders try to gather followers and not give them away, but John the Baptist was faithful and obedient to his identity and calling. He would "become less," and this was not a sad but rather a joyful thing (John 3:27–30).

► Do we have the humble spirit of John the Baptist? Are we content to play a supporting role? Is it our goal to "become less" so God can be glorified?

## Pray with Us

How easy it is to divert our praise from You to ourselves. Forgive us and humble us every moment of every day, Lord God. Diminish our self-importance and teach us to adore Your magnificent glory.

# The Seeking Shepherd

Read Luke 15:1–7

*Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.—Luke 15:6*

A. W. Tozer wisely commented: “The only safe place for a sheep is by the side of his shepherd, because the devil does not fear sheep; he just fears the Shepherd, that is all.” Today’s reading is often called the “parable of the lost sheep,” but it might be more accurately called the “parable of the seeking shepherd.” As we have learned so far this month, Jesus’ story would have evoked many Old Testament associations for His listeners.

Who were His listeners? Tax collectors and sinners gathered around Him (v. 1). They were the lost sheep who needed to hear this story. The Good Shepherd didn’t view them as “acceptable losses.” He would search until He found them, and all heaven would rejoice! The parable brilliantly showed these social outcasts that every single sheep matters to the Lord.

The Pharisees were also listening, but their hearts were proud and critical (v. 2). They were also lost, but

they didn’t recognize their need. Jesus’ comment at the end that they were the “ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” was ironic and sad (v. 7). This parable powerfully showed these self-important leaders the joy of God’s heart when sinners repent, as contrasted with their own rejection and grumbling.

The key theme in this parable is God’s love. We might picture God as a king sitting on his throne waiting to receive petitions, but our Shepherd actively seeks and cares for the lost (v. 4). The lost sheep in this parable does nothing but get lost. It can’t even walk home on its own (v. 5). Jesus told this as the first in a series of three parables—a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son—in which God’s relentlessly faithful and tender love is highlighted.

► Since all heaven rejoices in the salvation of one sinner, surely we can do the same! Thank God today for your salvation, as well as that of family and friends you know.

## Pray with Us

Each of us was once a lost sheep that You found and carried to safety. You are the Seeker and the Savior; we thank You for bringing ourselves and our loved ones into restored communion with You and with one another.

# A Shepherd's Failure

Read 2 Samuel 12:1–14

*Why did you despise the word of the Lord  
by doing what is evil in his eyes?—2 Samuel 12:9*

Literary scholar Leland Ryken describes the meeting between the prophet Nathan and King David as a “confrontation story.” He explains: “Usually the confrontation implies some tension or dissonance that needs to be acknowledged and resolved . . . [C]onfrontation stories imply an element of judgment or accusation.”

In today’s reading, King David had abused his power in order to commit adultery and murder (2 Sam. 11). It goes without explanation that this was the opposite of what a godly shepherd-king should be and do. And because David was the king, God’s anointed, his sin was more than personal and had significant consequences. By acting in outright disobedience, David had dishonored the Lord before the entire nation. As Nathan indicated, the essence of David’s wrongdoing was to despise the word of the Lord and to show utter contempt for Him (vv. 9, 14).

By obeying the Lord, Nathan was risking his life. It took great courage to

confront a king. Nathan’s parable had the purpose of calling forth confession and repentance from the intended audience of one (vv. 1–4). And his plan worked splendidly. David’s passionate condemnation of the rich man’s theft (vv. 5–6) was met with the prophet’s “You are the man!” (vv. 7–9). This story helped break through the king’s hard heart, overthrew his pride, and brought him back to the Lord. There would still be consequences (vv. 10–14), but God met David with grace and forgiveness.

We can look at the parables from yesterday and today as an opposing pair. Nathan’s story shows all a shepherd should not be—uncaring, selfish, exploitative, and unjust. Jesus’ parable, on the other hand, portrays all a shepherd should be—loving, faithful, and actively on the side of the weak.

► What is your response when confronted with evidence of your sin? Confession is a vital spiritual discipline.

## Pray with Us

“According to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Ps. 51:1–2, 10).

# Jesus, Our Good Shepherd

Read John 10:1–30

*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.—John 10:14*

The well-known “shepherd hymn,” Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Us, describes the compassionate care the Lord gives His children. “Savior, like a shepherd lead us, Much we need Thy tender care; In Thy pleasant pastures feed us, For our use Thy folds prepare.” The author, Dorothy Thrupp (1779–1847) wrote many hymns originally intended for children, but her words include all of us who follow the Good Shepherd.

Today’s reading teaches us several important truths. First, the Good Shepherd has a close relationship with His sheep (vv. 3–5, 27). The sheep recognize and respond to His voice by faith. In turn, He knows them each by name and leads them where they should go. This shepherd/sheep relationship is even compared to the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son (vv. 14–16).

Second, the Good Shepherd intends a full or abundant life for His sheep (v. 10). He Himself is the gate or way to salvation (v. 9), and it

is absolutely secure in God’s hands (vv. 29–30). He explains: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand” (v. 28). Nothing in all the universe is “able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).

Finally, the Good Shepherd loves His sheep sacrificially, giving His life for them (vv. 11, 15, 17–18). He does so out of love and obedience to His Father as well as on His own authority. Furthermore, His sacrificial love isn’t the end of the story—He holds authority over death and the grave. They cannot hold Him. He will take up His life again!

► Jesus’ guarantee of our salvation is sometimes called “perseverance” or “assurance of salvation.” If you feel uncertain about the security of your salvation, we encourage you to examine Romans 8:35–39; 2 Corinthians 1:21–22; and Ephesians 1:11–14—and rejoice!

## Pray with Us

Lord of all Creation, we confess that nothing can separate us from You. We, the lost sheep who could not find our way home, rejoice that You brought us to safety and now keep and protect us.

# Straying Sheep

## Read Isaiah 53

*We all, like sheep,  
have gone astray.—Isaiah 53:6*

For sheep who strayed from the shepherd, danger awaited! All sorts of harm, even death, could be the consequence of one who wandered. So if the Lord is not our shepherd, what's the consequence of choosing not to follow Him? Terrifyingly, there is only one consequence—death. Scripture compares those who trust in themselves to sheep who are “destined to die; death will be their shepherd” (Ps. 49:12–14).

Because of sin, death is humanity's common fate. Isaiah's statement of our sinful condition is clear: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray” (v. 6). Sin and death have been universal ever since Adam and Eve chose disobedience and left God's path, the only true and right path. On our own, as each of us surely knows, we, like sheep, are prone to wander. “Each of us has turned to our own way” or we act as our own god.

Despite our sinfulness, God loved us so much that He “laid on him [the Messiah] the iniquity of us all” (v. 6). Verses 4 and 5 describe

in graphic detail how Christ bore our sins and paid the punishment of death in our place. In the Mosaic Law, the sins of the nation were symbolically transferred to one of a pair of sacrificial goats. The designated “scapegoat” was then sent away from the community into the wilderness (Lev. 16:7–10). In the same way, the sins of the world were put on the perfect Messiah; He was executed as a criminal on our behalf (see 1 Peter 2:21–25).

The other goat was sacrificed as a sin offering. The Messiah accomplished this symbolism as well. He “was led like a lamb to the slaughter” (v. 7). He went willingly, without argument or complaint. He didn't protest the flagrant injustice. These prophecies were fulfilled during the trials of Jesus recounted in the Gospels (see Mark 14:53–65).

► Today's reading is a somber one. It emphasizes not only our own depravity and tendency to do what we believe is right but also details the heavy price Jesus paid on our behalf.

### Pray with Us

We lived in quest of gratuitous evil, hating truth and shunning shame. Jesus came, “a man of suffering, familiar with pain” (Isa. 53:3), to endure the punishment we deserved. We worship You for Your unfathomable mercy.

# Keeps Us from Straying

Read Psalm 119:169–176

*Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek after him with all their heart.—Psalm 119:2*

A lost dog in a Chicago neighborhood sparked a massive search that went viral on social media. Toby, a 2-year-old German shepherd, strayed from his yard, causing his family to scour the neighborhood and started a “Find Toby” movement on social media. Finally, a police officer found and returned the lost pup to his family. The officer said, “I’m just elated that he is home and that he brought all these strangers together.”

Sometimes we are a lot like that lost puppy. In our Christian walk, we face many temptations to stray from the true path. We’re still sheep, after all. Thanks to the Good Shepherd, we have been given resources to help us resist temptation and choose righteousness—most importantly, the Holy Spirit and God’s Word.

In Psalm 119 the Psalmist expresses his love for God’s Word. Where does this fit in our month’s study? After our initial decision to trust Christ for salvation, there is more work to be done. Theologians

call the first event “justification” and the second “sanctification.” We’re redeemed, and we’re also still in the process of being redeemed. This is why the Psalmist pleads, “Give me understanding according to your word” (v. 169). He’s boldly asking God Himself to be his teacher (v. 171).

The value of Scripture is clear: God’s Word is righteous (v. 172). It gives delight (v. 174). It sustains our very lives (v. 175). Sincere worshipers must choose and live by its precepts (v. 173). As we do so, we’ll overflow with praise (vv. 171–172, 175). When we lean on our own strength, it is easy to stray (v. 176). We depend on the Shepherd to seek us out and bring us back to Him. Humility and weakness should drive us time and again to His Word!

► Bible study is a spiritual discipline that keeps our hearts close to the Shepherd. We are glad you are studying the Bible with *Today in the Word*. Why not share this study with a friend today.

## Pray with Us

With the psalmist we cry, “May my lips overflow with praise” (Ps. 119:171). Teach us to walk with You as a child walks holding a parent’s hand: trusting, submissive, and happy just to be in Your presence!

# The Sheep of His Pasture

## Read Psalm 100

*Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his.—Psalm 100:3*

One of the many things we missed during the COVID-19 outbreak was the joy of singing together. But prior to the pandemic, about one in every six Americans sang in a choir! One study listed numerous benefits of singing in groups, including “better mental and physical health, a sense of belonging and feeling connected to others, better social skills, increased civic engagement and volunteering, developing leadership skills and much more.”

For believers, singing—whether by individuals, choirs, or congregations—has long been an essential part of worship. This is a major focus of Psalm 100, which urges us: “Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs” (v. 2). We have good reason to worship. Our identity as sheep and our relationship to the Shepherd inspires us to worship: “Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth” (v. 1). Some of us know that first phrase better in other translations, which read, “Make a joyful noise.”

When we’re with the Good Shepherd and part of His flock, our weaknesses are replaced with His strengths. We know that we are safe and glad in God’s presence. “It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture” (v. 3). God is worthy to be worshiped, and it is fitting and right that we do so. He “is good and his love endures forever” (v. 5).

Another reason to praise is because the LORD created us. He chose us and made us His own. He didn’t make us then send us out to fend for ourselves. He made it possible for us to have a personal relationship with Him. And so we have good reason to rejoice, to “[e]nter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise” (v. 4).

► Sing a joyful song to God today! Whether you sing in a group or alone, God delights in hearing the worship and praise of His people. Celebrate that we have been given such a Good Shepherd!

### Pray with Us

Father, we joyfully worship You, for “Only Thou art holy / There is none beside Thee / Perfect in power, in love and purity” (“Holy, Holy, Holy”). Praise the name of the Living God!

# Questions & Answers

## by Dr. Sanjay Merchant, Professor of Theology

**Q** Does God's attribute of infinitude mean that the past for us is like the present for God? In Ephesians 1:4 when it says that we were "chosen before the foundation of the world," is it like we were chosen now?

**A** First, let me define a few terms that will be helpful to our discussion. When we say "the present," we refer to a state of affairs involving everything that is actual. "The past" denotes states of affairs that were actual, and "the future" denotes states of affairs that will be actual. It is important to note that only the present exists; the past no longer exists and the future does not yet exist.

It is also true that God is infinite with regard to time. In other words, He is eternal. Yet, there are different ways of understanding His eternity. According to one view, God exists outside of time in a hermetically timeless state and His age is null ( $\emptyset$ ). Our human, temporal measurements of time do not apply to Him, as He experiences neither the past, the present, nor the future. If, as this view suggests, God is "atemporal," He chose us apart from time.

According to another view, He exists "forever and ever," and His

age is infinite ( $\infty$ ). He is all-enduring and experiences the present without beginning or end. If God is "omnitemporal," He truly did choose us before the creation of the universe.

In answer to your question, it is not the case that "the past for us is like the present for God" since God either exists outside of time or unceasingly exists in the present. Nothing exists in the past since the past is not a place for anything actual to exist. But from the perspective of our own temporal experience, we know that God chose us "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). We can confidently celebrate the central point of the verse: God chose to be in relationship with us!

**Q** If God knows the past, present, and future, He knew Adam and Eve would sin and be cast out of the Garden of Eden. Therefore, God knew He would send Jesus to suffer and die for our sins. If God so loved the world why even test Adam and Eve, since He knew the eventual outcome?

**A** God tested Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3), foreknowing that they would fall into sin and break fellowship with Him. For this reason, God's mission of salvation to humanity, inaugurated

**"God knows everything that has occurred in the past, everything that is occurring in the present, everything that will occur in the future, and everything that could, but will not, occur."**

in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, "was chosen before the creation of the world but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God" (1 Peter 1:20–21). Still, the testing of Adam and Eve in the garden, that leads to the fall and redemption of humanity, is not a mere charade. Although God foreknows everything that will occur, Adam and Eve freely sinned. Indeed, mere foreknowledge cannot cause us to do anything. We are the causes of our own free actions. And, since human actions are genuinely free, they are truly significant.

Perhaps, we might wonder, why did God not forego the creation, fall, and redemption of humanity? After all, He lacks nothing and did not need to create the world. We must recognize that it is His prerogative to reveal Himself as He wills.

**Q** If God didn't create evil and He's omniscient, it sounds like Satan was a surprise. Was God aware of how His praise worshiper would turn out? Please explain this.

**A** God is also infinite with regard to knowledge. In other

words, God is omniscient. He knows everything that has occurred in the past, everything that is occurring in the present, everything that will occur in the future, and everything that could, but will not, occur. In addition, He entertains no false beliefs, as He is cognitively perfect. He foreknew that Satan would rebel prior to (or apart from) Creation.

The advent of evil was no surprise to God. Although we might imagine that a world without Satan would be morally preferable, He permitted the Devil to rebel in order to demonstrate His glory to the world, just as He demonstrated His strength to Egypt, Israel, and the surrounding nations by permitting Pharaoh to flout his command to release Israel from slavery (Exodus 1–14). God reverses Satan's schemes, so that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). For example, Joseph declared to his brothers concerning their betrayal, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20). God, unexpectedly, reveals the fullness of His greatness and goodness through the fall of Satan, which is our highest blessing. ■

# Sheep Without a Shepherd

Read Matthew 9:27–38

*They were harassed and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd.—Matthew 9:36*

When people are hurting, God responds! Earlier this year, a church in West Virginia decided to host a last-minute food drive to help feed hungry families in their community. In just a few hours, people arrived with enough food to fill the back of a truck. Their mission? *To feed those in need physically and spiritually.* These believers were following Jesus as they cared for people's physical and spiritual needs.

Throughout His time on earth, Jesus demonstrated His care and compassion for people's physical and spiritual needs. The people Jesus encountered in "all the towns and villages" were harassed, helpless, lost, and confused (v. 35). Jesus points out why: The shepherds—that is, their religious leaders—weren't doing their job! Throughout the Old Testament, God expressed anger toward false shepherds and promised to be the Shepherd Himself (see, for example, Jer. 50:6–7 and Zech. 10:2–3). This demonstrates His faithful love,

because the sheep hadn't earned or deserved it. Christ was the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise.

Throughout this passage, therefore, Jesus acted exactly like we would expect a Good Shepherd to act. He took care of the weak and vulnerable by healing two blind men (vv. 27–31) and a demon-possessed man (vv. 32–33). He taught God's truth, proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, and showed compassion for the crowds (vv. 35–36). True sheep knew His voice and responded in faith (v. 33), while the Pharisees didn't understand and criticized (v. 34).

Jesus sent His disciples on a training mission (vv. 37–38; see also July 19). Although He switched to the metaphor of workers in a harvest field, His purpose was still to teach them about the heart of a true shepherd.

► How can we follow in the footsteps of Christ and show compassion to one another? Today consider how you can be the hands and feet of Christ to those around you.

## Pray with Us

Grant us Your heart of compassion toward the lost. As we minister to people's souls let us not be blinded to their physical need. Nor let us be so intent on providing material aid that we neglect the spiritual.

# Scandalous Shepherds

Read Jeremiah 23:1–6

*Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!—Jeremiah 23:1*

How do you know who to trust?

In today's world, it is easy to be deceived. We've all received "official sounding" phone calls or emails which appear legitimate, but are actually aiming to harm or manipulate us.

We've seen advertisements for miracle cures for weight loss, promising instant results with minimal effort. But after the money is paid, the product doesn't deliver results. The aim is not to help, but to harm or take advantage of us.

In the same way, the "shepherds" in today's reading were supposed to be genuine but were actually fake. Instead of acting as godly leaders who would serve and care for their people, they used their power to mislead and exploit them. These false shepherds—the rulers of Judah, as we know from the previous chapter—were worse than neglectful. They acted with actual malevolence, "destroying and scattering" the sheep (vv. 1–2; see also Ezek. 34:1–6).

They not only failed to do their job; they actually behaved as the

enemy of the sheep. The Lord would punish them severely for this! God would fix the problem by becoming their Shepherd Himself. In historical context, the images in verses 3–4 describe the Jews' return from Exile and faithful leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah. The sheep would then be safe, secure, and cared for.

In the long run, God would do even more for His people (vv. 5–6). He would one day raise up a "righteous Branch" or a Davidic king, that is, the Messiah, the ideal King (see Isa. 11:1–5). He will reign with wisdom, justice, and righteousness, and His name will be "The LORD Our Righteous Savior." This is a Messianic prophecy, and at the same time it is God keeping His promise to be His people's Shepherd by sending His own Son.

► Messianic prophecy has emerged as a major theme in our study of shepherd and sheep imagery in the Bible. To learn more on this topic, we recommend *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy*.

## Pray with Us

Holy God, we are in awe of Your incarnate Son, fully God and fully Man. Thank You for giving us the Word of God. He is the hope of the "harassed and helpless" (Matt. 9:36), delivering us from sin and deception.

# Worthless Shepherds

## Read Zechariah 11:4–17

*Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.—Luke 6:20*

Do you believe that following Jesus will make you successful? Does God promise to bless His followers with abundant riches? These ideas are central to what is commonly called the “prosperity gospel.” Leaders within this popular movement are known for their lavish lifestyles, promising health and wealth to all who follow. But if the prophet Zechariah was alive today, he would call them out as false. This is far from what the Bible actually teaches.

Scripture has nothing but harsh words for false teachers and false prophets. In today’s reading, God ordered His prophet Zechariah to shepherd a “flock marked for slaughter” (vv. 4–6). Their previous shepherds had oppressed and exploited them, using their power to benefit themselves and shamelessly calling it God’s blessing: “Praise the LORD, I am rich!” (v. 5).

Zechariah focused especially on the oppressed or the faithful remnant (vv. 7–14). For his shepherding, he used two staffs—Favor, meaning

God’s favor or covenant faithfulness, and Union, meaning seeing the divided kingdom as a reunited entity (referring to Ezekiel 37:15–28). He got rid of three bad shepherds (identity uncertain), but things did not go well after that. The people resisted, and both staffs were broken, meaning that God decided to allow Israel and Judah to be conquered. The “severance pay” was an insulting 30 pieces of silver. Matthew saw these verses fulfilled in Judas’ betrayal and the nation’s rejection of Jesus as the Messiah (Matt. 27:3–10). The passage closes with a prophecy about one more false shepherd (perhaps the Antichrist) who will be the worst of all, but who in the end will be struck down (vv. 15–17).

► Right doctrine is always important. Are you aware of the prosperity gospel and other false teachings that are popular in our day? Do some research or speak to a leader at your church about this topic so you can learn to discern truth from lies.

### Pray with Us

Lord of truth, destroy our most cherished lies and expose the smallest sins that cause us to wander. We would rather suffer rebuke and humbling Él than be led, or lead ourselves, astray.

# Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

Read Matthew 7:15–29

*Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.—Matthew 7:17*

The English language is filled with sheep imagery. If you can't sleep, we try "counting sheep." If you're accused of something, you try to look "as innocent as a lamb." Saying you'll be there "in two shakes of a lamb's tail" means you'll be there quickly. And we all know it's not a good thing to be the "black sheep of the family."

One such example, taken from the Bible, is "a wolf in sheep's clothing." This phrase refers to someone pretending to be harmless or part of a group in order to prey upon that group. Their disguise and wicked intentions pose a serious danger. Jesus taught that false prophets are wolves in sheep's clothing (v. 15). They're the opposite of what they say they are, and they mislead people by claiming to speak the word of the Lord when they do not.

Jesus gives another example, using fruit as an illustration. True prophets are known by their fruit. Good trees will bear good fruit and

vice versa (vv. 16–20). This is not just a probability but guaranteed by nature, although it does take discernment and wisdom to evaluate fruit accurately.

This principle also applies to the issue of true versus false disciples (vv. 21–23). A verbal confession by itself is not enough, nor are even apparent miracles. "Only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" is the real deal. Obedience is an indicator of true faith (see James 2:14–17). The fakers are wolves in sheep's clothing. Finally, we see the comparison to two houses built by wise and foolish builders (vv. 24–27). While on the outside both houses looked good, the storm revealed the very different quality of their foundations. One would last. The other would be destroyed.

► On what foundation are you building the "house" of your life? Be honest. Your activities and use of time and money show your priorities. What do they reveal about your end-goals in life?

## Pray with Us

Holy Spirit, today we pray for Your conviction. Show us any ways we habitually disobey or dishonor You. Grant us sincere repentance and bless us with good fruit.

# The Sending Shepherd

Read Matthew 10

*Go and make disciples  
of all nations.—Matthew 28:19*

In the military, soldiers are sent out on a mission, following clear directives from their leaders. They need to be ready because they do not know when they will be sent or where they will need to go. They do know that they will need to follow their leader's command.

When Jesus sent His disciples, He gave them the same power and purpose as Himself: They could do healing miracles and drive out demons (v. 1), and they were to proclaim the good news of the kingdom (vv. 7–8; see also Matt. 9:35). One order that may puzzle us today is that He instructed them to go exclusively to the Jews (vv. 5–6). This was not because He didn't love Gentiles, but as their promised Messiah Jesus was sent to the "lost sheep of Israel" first (v. 6). Later, Jesus commissioned them to take the gospel to all nations (v. 18; see also Matt. 28:19–20).

This mission would fulfill God's promises to His people. In Genesis 48,

Jacob was nearing death and called his son Joseph and grandsons to him. He formally blessed them in the name of "the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day" (Gen. 48:15). Through all the ups and downs of life, Jacob recognized the sovereign hand of God had cared for him. And in Jesus' command, we see the keeping of this covenant with God's people.

The Twelve were to go out like sheep among wolves (v. 16). Jesus warned them that they would face opposition and persecution and suffering for His name. In the midst of it, they were to model the kind of leadership and shepherding God intends for His people. True disciples put the Lord first, no matter what it costs (vv. 37–39).

► A key purpose of the disciples' "internship" in Matthew 10 was for them to learn the compassionate heart of Christ. How can we learn and practice this quality in our own lives?

## Pray with Us

Father, sometimes we have more compassion for strangers than for our own family members. Teach us compassion in our closest relationships, where proximity can breed callousness. Soften our hearts where they have grown hard.

# Feed My Sheep

Read John 21:15–19

*Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”—John 21:17*

When I was young, my mother always told me to eat my peas because they were good for me. As an adult, I know she's right. Green vegetables are an important source of protein, fiber, and vitamins . . . and they help lower cholesterol. Canadian researchers recently reported a new benefit: Peas can help fight high blood pressure and chronic kidney disease!

Just as physical nutrition is part of a healthy lifestyle, spiritual nutrition is part of growing in Christ. Good leaders know how to feed their flock spiritually nutritious food. This is what Jesus commissioned Peter to do in today's reading. Before the Crucifixion, Peter had crashed and burned.

Despite Jesus' explicit warning, he had denied his Lord three times. When the rooster crowed, Peter "broke down and wept" (Mark 14:72). He'd failed miserably. Although he felt joyful at seeing Jesus resurrected, he returned to his old fishing job in despair.

As He so often does, Jesus met Peter right where he was—with a

hot breakfast, no less (v. 9)! After the meal, they went on a walk, and Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" (v. 15), meaning more than the other disciples. After all, Peter had previously claimed greater loyalty than them (Matt. 26:33). This was an indirect rebuke by Jesus, accepted by Peter.

The third repetition of the question parallels Peter's three denials (v. 17). But Jesus wasn't rubbing it in. He wanted Peter to know he was fully forgiven, and to know He had work for him to do. The three commands to "feed my sheep" might be paraphrased, "Be the kind of shepherd God wants and I have modeled." Peter's story began anew with a fresh call from Christ, "Follow me!" (v. 19).

► Are you glad that our God is all about redeeming and restoring failures? The Lord gave Peter forgiveness and an opportunity for a fresh start, and He can do the same for you!

## Pray with Us

We need only look to the Patriarchs to know that You use imperfect people to accomplish Your will—even after they have failed You. When we fail, teach us not to wallow in shame but to repent and embrace redemption.

# Caring for the Sheep

Read 1 Peter 5:1–11

*Be shepherds of God's flock  
that is under your care.—1 Peter 5:2*

What is a pastor's main responsibility? "Since the 1960s, we have experienced an evolution in what we expect a local church pastor to be," wrote J. P. Moreland in *Love Your God With All Your Mind*. "Forty years ago he was expected to be a resident authority on theology and biblical teaching. Slowly this gave way to a model of the pastor as the CEO of the church, the administrative and organizational leader. Today the ministers we want are Christianized pop therapists who are entertaining to listen to."

In Scripture, however, a pastor's main responsibility is to care for the sheep and be examples to the flock (vv. 2–3). The word "pastor" actually comes from the Latin for "shepherd." Peter's restoration as an apostle (see yesterday's reading) led to a lifelong ministry of leading and feeding the sheep, and training others to do so as well. Church leaders were not to use their authority and resources for their own benefit, but for the growth of

the church. Good shepherds are truly "servant leaders" (see John 13:13–17).

Peter, who had once thought himself superior to the other disciples, in today's reading appeals humbly as one elder to another (v. 1). Even though he was an apostle and an eyewitness to the gospel, he didn't exalt himself over his fellow leaders. He instructed them to serve not out of obligation but with willing and eager hearts. They were not to pursue dishonest gain (see also 2 Peter 2:1–3) or lord it over others. Instead, they should lead the sheep (congregation) in the ways outlined in verses 5–9. They're to minister in Christ's grace and power (vv. 10–11), and their reward will be a "crown of glory" from the Chief Shepherd Himself (v. 4)!

► A pastor's job can be overwhelming. How can you be helpful to the pastor of your church? Reach out to see if there is a way you can be of assistance, and add your pastor to your prayer list.

## Pray with Us

Lord God, be with our pastors this week. Protect them from temptation so that their good example will not be tarnished. Fill them with Your supernatural love so that they won't grow weary of shepherding Your people.

# Spotless Lambs

Read Leviticus 4:32–35

*Wash me, and I will be  
whiter than snow.—Psalm 51:7*

Have you ever worn a brand new white shirt only to mar it with an accidental food stain? Even when you try your best to remove the offending mark, the shirt no longer has the same pristine appearance. The blemish is all you see. In the Old Testament, animals, brought to the Temple for sacrifice, were judged on their appearance. Only a spotless animal was considered worthy.

Today's description of the sin offering highlights three key principles behind the Old Testament sacrifices. First, the animal to be sacrificed had to be perfect, without defect (v. 32). This symbolized their need for a righteous substitute and pointed forward to Jesus Christ, who would one day be sacrificed for sinners like "a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19).

Second, the animal was to be sacrificed or killed in the worshiper's place, to demonstrate how the substitutionary principle worked (v. 33). This is why people laid their hands on the animal, identifying with

it and admitting their sinfulness. All have sinned, and death is the just penalty for sin. The animal died in a person's place to symbolize the justice of God's forgiveness. He hadn't simply waived the penalty. Someone had to die—the animals were "placeholders" until the coming of Christ (Heb. 10:1–6).

Third, atonement for sin required blood sacrifice (vv. 34–35). "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22). Hebrews teaches us that Jesus Christ is the perfect fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. He died on our behalf so that our sin is covered. Not only is Jesus Christ the perfect Shepherd, He was also the perfect Sacrifice.

► The next time you scrub at a stubborn stain, give thanks to God for the tremendous gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. Because of this gift, your sins are forever washed away. Christ's righteousness has redeemed us once and for all.

## Pray with Us

In a world that dismisses the sanctity of life, the significance of sacrificial blood can be lost on us. Lord, for Your glory, help us grasp the full import of Your substitutionary death on the cross.

# God Will Provide a Lamb

**Read Genesis 22:1–18**

*Abraham called that place The  
LORD Will Provide.—Genesis 22:14*

If you visit Jerusalem you can see the Dome of the Rock, an Islamic shrine built in the late seventh century and long recognized as one of the world's great architectural masterpieces. This is also said to be the site of Solomon's Temple (2 Chron. 3:1). In Abraham's day, it was known as Mount Moriah (v. 2).

When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the patriarch responded with faith and obedience. "Here I am" is the response of a true worshiper (v. 1). Having miraculously experienced the fulfilled promise of Isaac's birth in his old age, he was now asked to sacrifice that same fulfilled promise, the apparent future of his family and of God's covenant.

Yet there's no indication he hesitated. No doubt he had time to reconsider during the three-day journey, but his faith and obedience held firm. When Isaac asked, Abraham responded, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering" (v. 8). The New Testament adds that his faith

extended so far as to believe that God would raise Isaac from the dead if necessary (Heb. 11:17–19).

It's important to note that God tested Abraham, not tempted him (v. 1). God does not tempt people to do evil (James 1:13–15), but He does test us in order to confirm our faith and prove the quality of our commitment. Abraham passed this test with flying colors (v. 12)! His actions demonstrated conclusively that he valued the Lord above all. All-in faith in God is the only genuine kind there is (Luke 9:23–24; John 12:24–26).

Since God did indeed provide an animal for the sacrifice, Abraham named the place "The LORD Will Provide" (vv. 13–14). This is the first specific example of the substitutionary principle in Scripture (see Rom. 5:6–8).

► Spend some time today reflecting on the quality of your faith. Are you living wholeheartedly as a follower of Christ? If not, pray for God's help to strengthen your faith (Mark 9:24).

## Pray with Us

Our faith does not derive from ourselves, but from Christ's faithfulness. We ask that You strengthen our faith so that we, like Abraham, will obey You unswervingly.

# The Passover Lamb

Read Exodus 12:1–28

*Turn, LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love.—Psalm 6:4*

God had heard the cries of His people Israel in bondage in Egypt. He'd sent Moses to Pharaoh with the message, "Let my people go!" He'd also sent increasingly serious plagues to match Pharaoh's increasingly hardened heart and to demonstrate to everyone that the gods of Egypt could not and would not prevail. Today's narrative retells the climax of this drama. There would be one more plague to settle things: God would send an angel on a mission of death—to kill every firstborn son from the palace to the slums, throughout the land of Egypt.

The Israelites would be excluded, but not automatically. They were instructed to take a lamb, one per household, year-old males without defect, and slaughter them at twilight (vv. 3–6). They were then to put the lamb's blood on the doorposts of their homes so that the angel of death would skip or "pass over" their house (vv. 7, 12–13, 21–23). (This is

the same principle of substitutionary blood atonement we've already learned about this month.) That night, the Israelites were to eat the lamb, roasted with bitter herbs, along with unleavened bread. "Eat it in haste," God said, for their liberation was near at hand (vv. 8–11).

This life-changing day would be commemorated and celebrated down through the ages (vv. 24–27). It would be such a significant event for the nation that Passover would henceforth be a festival marking Day One of Month One on their calendar (vv. 2, 14–20; see Lev. 23:5–8). The tenth plague, Passover, the Exodus, and deliverance from bondage would be the defining events of Israel's history!

► The Israelites were asked to act in faith, believing in what God promised. Too often we act based solely on what we can see. Do you tend to live by faith or by sight? How can you live today in faith, believing that God will complete His promises for you?

## Pray with Us

You are faithful, God, keeping Your promises and upholding Your covenants, even when others renege. Knowing that You are trustworthy and unchanging, we place our faith in You and choose to believe Your Word.

# Jesus' Final Passover

Read Mark 14:12–26

*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.—Matthew 26:28*

One of the most famous paintings in the world is *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. The painting shows the moment Jesus announced He would be betrayed, with the disciples reacting in different ways appropriate to their personalities. Other things are going on as well, including Jesus gesturing to the bread and the wine that are the central symbols of communion or the Lord's Supper.

What we call “the Last Supper” was Jesus’ final Passover meal. As a Jew, He celebrated Passover every year. One cannot help but wonder if growing up He was ever the child who asked the question, “What does this ceremony mean to you?” (Ex. 12:26). In today’s reading, He knew it would be His last Passover on earth, and for this reason He’d looked forward greatly to celebrating it with the Twelve. At the conclusion of the meal, they would sing a hymn, traditionally Psalms 115–118 (v. 26).

That day, Jesus certainly had two topics on His mind. First, He knew

there was a traitor among them (vv. 18–21). His astonishing announcement caused consternation among the disciples. Who could it be? As we now know, it was Judas. Second, Jesus had a serious reason for instituting a new Passover (vv. 22–25). The bread represented His body, soon to be tortured and broken on the cross (see John 6:48–51). The wine represented His blood, soon to be shed on the cross. The original Passover included substitutionary blood atonement and liberation from bondage (see yesterday’s reading). The new Passover carries a similar symbolism: Jesus died in our place to free us from sin. His innocent blood paid the price of death for all who believe. We can receive forgiveness and eternal life by trusting in Him for salvation!

► Does your church observe communion? Before the next observance, spend time reflecting on the passage in 1 Corinthians 11:23–29. “Do this in remembrance of me,” Jesus said—a solemn responsibility and privilege.

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## Pray with Us

Lord, when You sent Your Son to the earth, You already knew that Judas would betray You, Peter would deny You, and we would dishonor You. We worship You for Your well-informed love—and for Your promise of sanctification.

# Yeast, Sin, and the Passover Lamb

## Read 1 Corinthians 5

*He sacrificed for their sins once and for all when he offered himself.—Hebrews 7:27*

Jesus Christ is both our Good Shepherd and the perfect Lamb of God, sacrificed for our salvation. While under the Mosaic Law animals had to be sacrificed over and over, our Lord Jesus became the perfect Sacrifice who paid that price once for all (Heb. 7:26–28). As we read the Passover and Last Supper narratives, we learned that Jesus is our Passover Lamb (v. 7). Because of Christ's blood, God "passes over" us. Instead of paying the penalty of death, we receive His gift of eternal life.

When we take communion, the bread and the wine symbolize Jesus' body and blood, sacrificed for us. The yeast (actually fermented dough) mentioned in these verses is also a reference to the Passover (vv. 6–8; see also Ex. 12:19). Unleavened bread, or bread without yeast as a rising agent, was eaten on Passover. Yeast figuratively represents sin or wickedness. The phrase "as you really are" (v. 7) indicates that we should "get rid of the old yeast" and choose

to live in accord with our new identity as believers. In the same way, during the original Passover, the Israelites chose to trust and act as God's special people.

This was not an abstract theological point. Paul was confronting a specific situation of immorality that had been occurring in the Corinthian church (vv. 1–5). Their failure to deal with sin dishonored Christ's sacrifice. The same is true today. When the church associates with or even tolerates sin we are dishonoring the name of Christ and our own salvation (vv. 9–13).

► Accountability plays an important role in the Christian walk. Are you currently in an accountability relationship? This is a relationship in which you allow a fellow believer to hold you responsible for sin in your life, especially in particular areas of temptation. Think about who you could ask to play this important role in your life.

### Pray with Us

Father God, thank You for the friendships You have already given us. Grant us humility and love to hold our friends accountable. We ask that You move those who love us to hold us accountable as well.

# Sheep and Goats

Read Matthew 25:31–46

*Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.—Matthew 25:45*

Sheep and goats have many similarities, but they are distinctively different. One way to tell the difference is to look at their tails. A goat's tail goes up, while sheep tails hang down. They also behave differently. While goats eat leaves, twigs, vines, and shrubs, browsing for food, sheep are grazers, feasting on grass. Sheep stick together, while goats are curious and independent.

In today's passage, Jesus is telling a series of parables. He then describes what will happen at His Second Coming, "when the Son of Man comes in his glory" (v. 31). He will separate people like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. What was the difference? He bases this decision on their actions with regard to the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and other needy or low-status persons. The sheep fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and the imprisoned (vv. 35–36), while the goats did not.

This parable illustrates the

difference between true and false followers of Christ. The sheep were true disciples because they did what Christ would have done, and therefore it was as if the good deeds had been done for Christ Himself. The goats, on the other hand, did not, and it was as if they had failed Christ Himself in His hour of need. That's the principle in this passage: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (vv. 40, 45).

These people have a different destiny. True followers of Christ, the sheep, are given eternal life and welcomed into God's kingdom (v. 34). The goats, false followers, are sent to eternal fire and punishment (vv. 41, 46).

► Are you a sheep or a goat? True followers of Christ act with the compassion of their Shepherd. This shows them to be true believers, saved by faith. While we aren't redeemed by good works, our behavior testifies to the genuineness of our faith.

## Pray with Us

Conform us to Your image, Lord God. Fill us with Christ-like compassion for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the sick. We minister not to assure ourselves of our salvation, but so others may see You in our actions.

# The Conquering Lamb

Read Revelation 5

*Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!—Revelation 5:12*

On October 31, 2018, a single web of lightning flashed and stretched 440 miles over Brazil. About the distance from Boston to Washington, it was the longest (in distance) lightning strike ever measured. Then on March 4, 2019, a lightning bolt lit up over Argentina and lasted 16.73 seconds, the longest (in time) lightning strike ever. These two lightning strikes were powerful and awe-inspiring, but nothing compared to the infinite and eternal power of God!

Today's chapter opens with a dilemma (vv. 1–5): Who is worthy to open the scroll and set in motion a series of end times judgments? The apostle John, the author of Revelation, wanted to know the answer so intensely that he wept. An elder reassured him that "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed" and is worthy to open the scroll. These are Messianic titles. John turned . . . and instead of a Lion, saw "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain" (vv. 6–7). Its seven horns

symbolize authority and power, while its seven eyes indicate knowledge and wisdom.

The Lamb, an image from Jewish apocalyptic literature and tradition, is a common picture of Christ throughout Revelation. It blends two truths: The Lamb had been slain as a substitutionary, redemptive sacrifice for sin (v. 9). Yet at the same time, the Lamb is a conquering king (see, for example, Rev. 17:14).

When the Lamb takes the scroll, heaven responds with worship of the One who is worthy. The four living creatures and 24 elders bow down (vv. 8–10), then a heavenly host of angels joins in (vv. 11–12), and finally every creature in all creation sings the praise of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (vv. 13–14)!

► A great topic for additional Bible study would be to look up all the Lamb references in the book of Revelation. Or, if time is short, we invite you to read Revelation 7:9–17, in which the Lamb is also our Shepherd!

## Pray with Us

Awaiting Your return with hope, we pray with joy, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13).

# Peace in the Kingdom

Read **Isaiah 11:1–9**

*The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.—Isaiah 11:9*

A beautiful portion of Bach's Cantata No. 208 is titled "Sheep May Safely Graze." Sheep and shepherd imagery is used to explain how people benefit when they have good leaders: "Sheep may safely graze and pasture/In a watchful shepherd's sight. /Those who rule, with wisdom guiding,/Bring to hearts a peace abiding./Bless a land with joy made bright."

During the future Millennial Kingdom, with the perfect King on the throne, perfect *shalom* will reign (vv. 6–8). *Shalom* means peace, in the larger sense of holistic well-being. All will be well. No enemies will threaten. There will be no poverty, no sickness, no fear, no death. There will instead be freedom and safety and abundance. The "natural order" of our fallen and sinful world will be no more (Rom. 8:20–21). The wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard with the goat. Children will play with cobras.

The Ruler of this perfect kingdom will be Jesus Christ, the Messiah,

the Branch and Root of the tree (family line) of David (vv. 1–5). He is wise, understanding, and powerful. He possesses knowledge, insight, and compassion. He acts with righteousness, justice, and faithful love. He is obedient to His Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit. How will this kingdom be possible? "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (v. 9; see Hab. 2:14). This is the ultimate and perfect fulfillment of the Bible's sheep and shepherd imagery (see especially Ezek. 34:25–29). The Lord will be our Shepherd, the journey will be over, and we will lack nothing. Jesus our Good Shepherd will have brought His flock safely home.

► As we near the end of this topical study, take some time to review and reflect. Jot down some thoughts and prayers in your notebook or journal. Ask the Lord what He wants you to do in response to truths that have become more real to you this month.

## Pray with Us

We are Your sheep, and You are our shepherd. We trust and submit to Your will, looking forward with assured hope to the time when You establish Your perfect kingdom.

# Our Future Home

## Read Revelation 22:1–5

*When Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.—1 John 3:2*

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety and depression ramped up among people of all ages. The isolated and unstable conditions, constant news reports, and conflicting information increased our feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. People struggled not just with the threat of illness but also with fears of the unknown future.

While as believers, we can relate to those feelings, we are also thankful that no matter the circumstances we have a true source of help and hope in Christ. Today's reading reminds us of our secure future with Christ. The new Jerusalem will be perfectly ruled from the "throne of God and of the Lamb" (vv. 1, 3). The Good Shepherd will have established *shalom* for His entire flock. Worship and service will be our normal mode of existence. God will dwell with His people continuously and directly, and we "will see his face" (v. 4; see 1 John 3:2). His presence will light the city always (v. 5).

"The river of the water of life," that is, salvation, will flow from His throne (see John 7:37–39). Alongside the river will be the tree of life, bearing fruit monthly (v. 2). Ever since the Fall, humanity has been barred from eating from the tree of life (Gen. 3:22–24), but that will change. Eden will be restored. The leaves of the tree will be for the "healing of the nations," that is, "no longer will there be any curse" (v. 3).

Human history will be healed of the consequences of sin and death. Believers from around the globe, with His name on our foreheads identifying us as His (v. 4), will sing praise to the Lamb (Rev. 5:9)!

► We're coming to the end of our study of Sheep and Shepherds. We hope you have enjoyed learning about the rich symbolism and meaning of these two terms. Next month, join us as we begin a study on the Old Testament book of Hosea!

### Pray with Us

Our names are written in the Book of Life! We praise You for the day You have promised, when we can drink from the river of the water of life and eat of the tree of life, with Your name written on our foreheads!

# A Shepherd's Benediction

Read Hebrews 13:20–21

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.—John 10:11*

Commenting on today's reading, the *Africa Study Bible* points out: "We can often see if preaching about blessing is false or true by looking at its focus. False teachings about blessings are about meeting our needs, finding our success, and building our strength. Biblical teachings about blessing are about God's work, God being pleased, and God being glorified."

As we've delved into sheep and shepherd imagery in Scripture this month, we've found several significant themes: God is our Shepherd, leading the flock toward *shalom*. The Son of God is also our Shepherd. He sought us out and we belong to Him. Church leaders are essentially under-shepherds, leading and feeding the sheep on a disciples' pilgrimage. We're all sheep, foolish and weak on our own yet beloved by the Shepherd. He sacrificed His very life for us as the Passover Lamb whose blood gives us life.

Hebrews 13:20–21 is an appropriate word of blessing as we conclude this study. The blessing can

come only from the "God of peace," who as part of an "eternal covenant" is accomplishing peace and redemption through the blood of His Son, whom He resurrected from the dead. Christ, the "great Shepherd of the sheep," laid down His life willingly and sacrificially for us (John 10:11).

The writer of Hebrews asked that God would "equip you with everything good for doing his will" and that He would "work in us what is pleasing to him." An obedient heart is assumed. That's different from most of our prayers, in which we're focused on what would please us.

It's all here in two verses—what Jesus did for us, how much God loves us, what we as sheep should be doing if we know what's good for us, and the power and glory of our great Shepherd's redemption in conquering sin and death.

► A benediction is also a prayer, as well as a word of blessing. We encourage you to pray these verses throughout the day, and perhaps even at dinner or family devotions.

## Pray with Us

God of peace, equip us with every good thing for doing Your will. Work in us what is pleasing to You "through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Heb. 13:21).



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