

# **TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD**

## **WHO PROVIDES A SHEPHERD FOR HIS PEOPLE**

### **Numbers 27:12-23**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most common word pictures that the Bible uses to describe the relationship of God to human beings is that of a shepherd to his sheep. In our text this morning it is this metaphor which stands at the heart of Moses' concern for Israel (v.17). Most of us, when we think of sheep, have a picture of a cute, cuddly, innocent, fuzzy little lamb. Thus when we hear that God views us as sheep we think of ourselves as cute, lovable little creatures that God would be happy to bring home. However, when the Bible uses the metaphor it does not use it to emphasize how lovable we are. Rather, the fact that we are sheep emphasizes that we are weak, defenseless, foolish and rebellious. Sheep are easy prey for wolves and other predators, they cannot defend themselves. Sheep cannot live without a shepherd to care for them and lead them. Sheep are foolish and regularly get themselves into trouble. Sheep are rebellious and at the first opportunity will leave behind the safety of the flock and reject the leadership of the shepherd.

It is because we are sheep that we need a shepherd. God, as you may know is frequently called the shepherd of Israel and of individual believers in the OT. Most famously in Psalm 23 which begins "The Lord is my shepherd." Psalm 80:1 begins, "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!" In addition, the human leaders that God appoints in the OT are often called shepherds or leaders of the flock. Moses and Aaron are identified as those who led Israel like a flock in Psalm 77:20. In our text this morning, Joshua is identified as Israel's future shepherd. In almost identical language to v. 17 David is identified as Israel's shepherd in 2 Samuel 5:2 in which the people of Israel say to David, "In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.'" All of the human leaders of Israel, prophets, priests and kings are all called bad shepherds in Ezekiel 34. In fact, it is because all of the human shepherds of Israel in the OT failed in their duties, including Moses, Joshua and David that God promises repeatedly that he is going to raise up a perfect shepherd for his people. Thus, when Jesus appears he identifies himself as that promised good shepherd who will not fail to care for God's sheep. All the human shepherds who came before him either turned out to be thieves or abandoned their posts out of fear because they were not the true shepherd of God's people but merely men.

Thus as we observe the passing on of the shepherd's mantle from Moses to Joshua in this passage we are witnessing numerous foreshadowings of the perfect shepherd who was to come. The central concern of this passage is this: because we are sheep we need a shepherd. In Moses and Joshua and the transference of the shepherd's authority in this passage we will observe four characteristics of our good shepherd. If you view yourself as strong and wise and capable and a generally good person then what we are told about Jesus and his work in this passage will be of no interest to you. However, if you know yourself to be a weak, defenseless, foolish and rebellious sheep, then what we are told about our shepherd here will be good news.

#### **MAIN POINT**

**We are sheep, therefore we need a shepherd who...**

#### **I. Dies for sin before we can enter God's pastures (vv.12-14)**

Our passage this morning begins with Yahweh telling Moses that in a short time he is going to die, just like Aaron died, by going up one of the peaks within the mountains of Abarim where he will be able to see the Land of Promise while he dies. Moses does not go up the mountain and die until the end of Deuteronomy, which is at about a year after this conversation takes place. God reminds Moses that the reason that he will die and that Aaron has already died and not get to go into the land is because of what happened while Israel was camped in

the wilderness of Zin. At that time (Numbers 20), if you will remember, the people of Israel complained that they had run out of water and were going to die of thirst. They accused Moses and Aaron of bringing them out of Egypt to kill them with thirst in the wilderness. They accused them of failing to keep their promise to bring them into a land with abundant food and water. At that time the Lord told Moses to go speak to the rock and thus bring water out of it for Israel to drink. Moses gathered the people and said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" Then Moses hit the rock twice with his staff and water came out of the rock. Immediately the Lord told him and Aaron that since they did not treat him as holy in front of the people of Israel, they would not get to enter the land but would die outside it.

It is quite clear from both the OT narrative and from several NT passages (1 Corinthians 10 & Hebrews 3-4) that all the Israelites who died in the wilderness, outside the land of Canaan not only died physically but also were cast into hell forever for their sins. What about Moses and Aaron? They died outside the land for their sin, does that mean they also perished forever? The answer to that question is no. First, when God says that Moses will be "gathered to his people" that phrase is regularly used of believers in the OT as a poetic way of describing resurrection to eternal life. Second, both Moses and Aaron are referred to as members of God's elect, believing people throughout the rest of the Bible in contrast to that unbelieving generation that perished. Finally, if you will remember, it was Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration to discuss his impending death while Peter, James and John looked on.

So how are we to understand the death of Moses? First, considering Moses as simply a human being we are to recognize the fact that leaders are going to be held to a higher standard and thus will face a stricter judgment: as Jesus said in relation to his 12 apostles: "to whom much is given, much shall be required." Here is evidence of the truth of what James says in his letter: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." Every pastor and parent and small group leader should recognize in Aaron and Moses' death outside the land of Canaan a warning of how closely God is watching how you carry out your duties as his representative.

However, as Moses says of himself in Deuteronomy 18, the Messiah is going to be a prophet like him. Moses and his relationship to God and to the people of Israel is a type of Jesus and his saving work for his people. Thus, just as Moses had to die because of sin before Israel could enter the Promised Land, so Jesus must die because of sin before his people can enter God's kingdom. While Moses is a sinner by nature and by act; the sinless Jesus, we are told, "was made to be sin" by God the Father "so that we might become in him the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21)." Jesus died as a sinner because God imputed to him the sin and guilt of every believer. In order for us to enter into God's heavenly kingdom our sin must be punished. God is good and thus he cannot permit sin to go unpunished. So, just as he killed Moses for his sin, outside the land of Promise, so God killed his son for our sins which became his sins, outside of the Promised Land. (Three times in the book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 1:37, 3:26 & 4:21) Moses refers to his death outside the land. He says he is going to die outside the land of Canaan because of the sins of Israel, not for his sin. Thus, Moses himself recognizes the pattern that the shepherd of Israel must die for the sins of the people before they can enter God's holy land.)

Because we are rebellious sheep we need our shepherd to lay down his life for us. Our sins must be paid for and this is accomplished by our sins being put upon Christ and then God killing him on another mountain, called Golgotha, outside of the true Land of Promise, heaven itself. Every believer can be sure that Jesus died because of your sins and thus you will never die because of your sins. All of your sins are forgiven and you will never be judged for all the evil you have done because your shepherd was made to be sin for you and died as a sinner, in your place. If you do not yet believe in Jesus as the one who died for you and thus the only reason God loves you and welcomes you into his heaven, then I beg you to today trust in Christ and be saved from God's just anger against you for your sins.

## **II. Prays for us so we enter God's inheritance (vv.15-17)**

If God told you that you were going to die in the very near future without experiencing your fondest desire and dream on this earth, how would you respond? For what would you ask God? This is the situation of Moses. God has just told him that he is not going to experience that event for which he has given his life for the past 40 years. He will not get to go into the Promised Land with Israel. How does Moses respond to the news of his impending death outside of the Promised Land? Moses does not mope or complain or fear but he immediately asks the God who creates life and sustains life and rules over all life to take care of the people of God by providing another man to lead them and to be their shepherd so that the people of God will not be like sheep who have no shepherd, who have no one to care for them (vv.15-17). Moses' first concern is for God's people. In this he is the perfect pattern of our Lord Jesus who, on the night before he was killed, just hours before he entered the suffering of hell, prayed for the people of God.

While the details of their prayers are different, yet the chief concern of both Moses and Jesus was the protection of the people of God and their preservation. Listen to a part of Jesus' prayer for us, the church in John 17, just hours before he was killed: "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word... I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, ... Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one... I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth... I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word... (John 17:6-20)" It is a remarkable thing that our Lord Jesus in the hours leading up to his cruel and horrific death was concerned for us. We were on his mind as he went to that cross and he, like Moses, asked his sovereign Father to protect and provide for us so that we, at the end of all things would enter into the joy of his glory.

Jesus not only prayed for us prior to his death but even now he is praying for us, just as Moses prayed for Israel, not only on this occasion but on many others as well. This is one of the chief ways that Moses foreshadows our Savior. He was continually falling on his face before God, asking God to not punish Israel for their sins but to preserve Israel in spite of their sins. So also our Lord Jesus continues day and night to pray for his chosen ones, his church. Romans 8:34, "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." Hebrews 7:25, "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." Jesus prior to his death and ever since his ascension to the Father's right hand prays for us as our good shepherd. He continually asks God to forgive us because of his death and to provide for us all that we need so that we will gain our promised inheritance. Here is a great source of security and joy for every believer. Your good shepherd, our Lord Jesus right now and forever is at God the Father's right hand asking him to welcome us as his children and to use his omnipotent power to protect and preserve us from all harm so that we can live safely in his eternal kingdom.

### **III. Conquers our enemies so we can safely enter the land (vv.17-21)**

As Moses knows that the people of God are about to enter the Promised Land and engage in warfare with the enemies of God, his prayer is that God would provide a shepherd-warrior, a champion to go before them and lead them. The odd phrases "who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in" is used one other time in the OT in regard to David's leading the armies of Israel in warfare. This is the exact thing which Israel needs at this time. There are giants in the land and large fortified cities and enemies at every turn. They need a man who will be able to lead them into war and thus conquer their enemies. Joshua is that champion whom God appoints to destroy the enemies of Israel and bring them into God's Promised Land.

The need for a conquering champion for Israel is a regular concern throughout the OT. At various points it appears that God provides what is needed in a human champion. Here it is Joshua, later there are the various judges that God raises up to fight against Israel's enemies, finally we have the kings beginning with Saul and

then the greatest king of all, David and all of his descendants. Yet, throughout the entire OT each of the human warrior kings are found to be defective. When Joshua dies there are numerous enemy tribes yet living in the land of Canaan. He did not drive out and destroy all the enemies. The story of the Judges is a continual saga of failure of both judges and people to be faithful to God and to be successful over Israel's enemies. Even King David fails as the faithful warrior shepherd of Israel by his adultery and murder.

Thus we are to recognize in the prayer of Moses for a man to go before them as their conquering hero as a petition for the coming of the Messiah, of the perfect, invincible champion of God's people. Joshua, whose name in Greek is Jesus, is the imperfect type of that perfect warrior king who shares his name. Jesus by his death and resurrection has conquered every enemy that stands between us and our eternal inheritance. Listen to the ways in which Christ's victory over our enemies is described in the NT: Jesus "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10)," "our old self was crucified with Christ so that we should no longer be slaves to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin (Romans 6:6-7)," "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life (Romans 5:10)." "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15)," "you also have died to the law through the body of Christ... there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Romans 7:4 & 8:1)."

If Jesus Christ is your champion through faith then there is nothing and no one that can keep you out of heaven. Christ has conquered every enemy of your soul. There is nothing that can now separate you from his love, nothing and no one who can successfully keep you from your eternal inheritance. The land is yours. Every enemy is vanquished. There is nothing to fear. Though you are a vulnerable, defenseless sheep, all the wolves have been exterminated, the thieves have been destroyed, the path is clear, he is leading you to the quiet waters along paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death you need fear no evil for he, your powerful, victorious shepherd is with you. However, if you are not trusting in Christ as your warrior king then you are defenseless against the enemies of humanity: your own sin, God's just law, Satan's power, the world system that opposes God and God himself who is the enemy of every unbelieving sinner. Do not remain a wandering, defenseless sheep, return to the good shepherd.

#### **IV. Shepherds us by his appointed undershepherds (vv.18-23)**

The entire ordination ceremony for Joshua which God commands Moses to perform and which he does perform is clearly a foreshadowing of the ordination of human leaders in the church of Jesus through the years. It begins with Jesus himself calling his disciples to himself and then choosing 12 of them to be his apostles. He commissions them to shepherd his people, to feed his sheep once he is gone. He gives them a portion of his authority, just as Moses places a portion of this authority on Joshua. As Moses met with God face to face and gave to Israel the Law so Jesus did and said only what he heard and saw his Father saying and doing. He is the only one who lives in the "bosom of the Father" as John says in his gospel. Every word that Jesus spoke was the word of the Father, as was every word that Moses spoke to Israel.

However, the disciples, like Joshua, do not share that same level of intimacy with God. You can see in v. 20 that Moses was to give Joshua only some of his authority and then in v. 21 whereas Moses spoke directly to God, Joshua would only discover the will of God through the high priest, Eleazer. Yet, as v. 20 says, the authority that Joshua was given was so that the people of Israel would obey him. In the same way the authority that Jesus gave the apostles was for the purpose of instructing the people of God so that they would obey what God said through the apostles. Is this not exactly what Jesus said in his Great Commission to his apostles? "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you..." Jesus gave a portion of his authority to the apostles so that people would obey him by obeying them.

Moses' commissioning of Joshua does not only foreshadow the commissioning of the 12 apostles by Jesus but also foreshadows the ongoing ordination of human elders/pastors/overseers in the church of Jesus through the centuries. As we ordained Aric, Dave and Steve this morning by the laying on of hands we recognize that they have been given a portion of the very authority of Jesus in this church. They have been given this authority so that you, the people, will obey them as they teach God's word and seek to apply it to your lives. As the author to the Hebrews says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account..." Pastors/elders in the local church are to be viewed by the congregation as the means by which Jesus is taking care of his flock.

We all know that authority can be abused. We all know that our elders/pastors are not infallible or beyond being questioned or corrected by the congregation. However, every Christian is to have a heart that is inclined to heed and to obey what the elders/pastors of your local church say. The default attitude of a Christian is not skepticism or suspicion of his or her leaders but, as Paul instructs in 1 Thessalonians 5, respect and high regard for them. The reason for this is because Jesus is at work in them and through them to lead you and to protect you and to strengthen you in your faith so that you make it safely into his heavenly kingdom. Jesus is being your shepherd through them. The ceremony we conducted this morning is not a game. We really do believe that Jesus is speaking to us and leading us through these men. These men are not just officers of some club but the actual representatives of Jesus to us as a congregation. I know that sounds weird to us Americans. But it is the testimony of the entire Bible that God is shepherding his people through the duly appointed elders and pastors of each local church.

Each of us has to evaluate our heart attitude towards the duly appointed leaders of our church. Do you respect them? Do you, like the church in Thessalonica, receive their word, as they teach and apply God's word, "not as the word of men but as it actually is, the word of God?" Or are you indifferent to them and what they say? Are you skeptical and suspicious and cynical? Here is a fact, how you treat the duly appointed leaders of your local church is how you are treating Jesus. "So I urge you, on behalf of Christ, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work."

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