

Christ in the Psalms

The Psalm of the Great Shepherd



WEST SOUND COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Among the many Psalms through which we see Jesus, perhaps Psalm 23 stands out the most...at the very least it seems to be everyone's favorite. In the first verse are two words that boldly proclaim the identity and character of God our protector and provider...*the LORD is my shepherd*. The Lord God Almighty is who the psalmist has in mind and protecting and providing for his people are the character traits the psalmist wants to highlight.

First, before we take a closer look at the Lord's character, let's consider his identity. Notice again verse one: *A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want*. So, the first four words are actually a notation letting us know who penned the Psalm. Now knowing who wrote it, we can ask, "Okay, what does King David want to tell us about the Lord?" More importantly, via the use of inspiration through David, "What does God himself want to say about himself? And here's where the fun begins..."

For starters, consider the word David used to identify God: *LORD*. There is something curious going on here. Did you notice that all four letters of the word are capitalized? *LORD*. The reason for this usage stems from the ancient custom of the Israelites to "not speak the actual name of God"...which in Hebrew is YHWH. This is the name by which God identified himself. However, the ancient Israelites were nervous about saying his name aloud, so every time they came to it they would substitute the Hebrew word for *lord*...*adonai*. This is a word more commonly used for lord or master. It sometimes referred to God, but it could also be applied to an earthly king or ambassador or boss...etc.

Due to the lack of vowels in the Hebrew alphabet and the lack of pronouncing his name—YHWH—the actual pronunciation is lost to us. In times past, some Hebrew to English translators chose to utilize Jehovah on behalf of YHWH, however, scholars now recognize this as a mistake and usually offer something along the lines of Yahweh...though this too is also not a certainty.

Does this personal name of God teach us anything about himself. Yes! Look at this interchange between God and Moses (in which Moses first learns both the name and reality of the Almighty).

Exodus 3:9-15

Exodus 3:9 *And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.*

Exodus 3:10 *Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."*

Exodus 3:11 *But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"*

Exodus 3:12 *He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."*

Exodus 3:13 *Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"*

Exodus 3:14 *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

Exodus 3:15 *God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations."*

Look again at verses fourteen and fifteen. In verse fourteen we see a descriptive phrase about God: “I AM WHO I AM.” In verse 15, we see the name of God: *The LORD* (YHWH). The phrase and the name are linguistically linked. The name YHWH is very similar to the word for I AM. So, in identifying himself as YHWH, God not only reveals his name, but the nature of his being. He is the I AM.

I am who I am.
I am that I am.
I am the one who is.
What I am I will be.

In fact, one writer expressed it with “I am the Is-ing One,” that is, “the One Who Always Is.”

There is nothing to miss here. God has a name and it tells us he is eternal...the One who simply is forever ...without beginning, neither with ending. He is not measured by time or space or matter, because he is completely other...the eternal and infinite spirit...the One who was, is, and shall be forever.

Second, having learned the Lord’s identity, let’s consider his character. Again, in verse one, David wrote, “*The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want.*” The Hebrew word for shepherd simply refers to one who watches over sheep as they graze upon the pasture. He tends the flock, watches over the flock, leads the flock to greener grass, protects the flock from predators. The shepherd is a herdsman...both literally with woolly sheep and figuratively with people (who at times have the wool pulled over their eyes). Neither sheep or people can survive well without the Shepherd. David knew this. He had grown to depend upon it...to depend upon the LORD, his shepherd. It’s why he could say, “*I shall not want.*”

Let’s recap...

The writer is King David...under the supernatural inspiration of God.
The subject is the Eternal God who shepherds over David as his protector and provider.

May we ask what this looks like in real time? Yes.

1. **God, the Good Shepherd, can be trusted to provide: Psalm 23:2-4**

A. He will provide for our needs.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.” 23:2

B. He will provide for our anxieties.

“He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” 23:3,4

Point: We have neither need or anxiety beyond our God’s ability and desire to handle. So, trust him.

2. **God, the Good Shepherd, can be trusted to protect: Psalm 23:5.6**

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

Point: Both now and eternally the good and merciful God will be our salvation.

BUT WAIT! There is more!

Third, look at this from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome (Romans 10:9,10):

*“But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that **Jesus is Lord** and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”*

Notice that phrase, *Jesus is Lord*. The New Testament Greek word for Lord is kurios.

Remember what Psalm 23:1 said... “*A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want.*”

There is something here we must see...

In an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word for *LORD* (YHWH) was the very same word we find in Romans 10:9 in the phrase *Jesus is Lord*...kurios!

We see the same thing in the Letter to the Philippians (2:8-11, looking especially at verse 11)...

“And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The Greek word behind Lord in the phrase “*confess that Jesus Christ is Lord*” is once again kurios.

And check out one other passage containing the word kurios (Acts 15:37-40, looking especially at verse 40)...

“Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.”

Here too the word for the English *Lord* is the Greek kurios...and clearly means God.

So? Just this...Almighty God, the eternal and infinite spirit, known to King David, is the Messiah...the Lord Jesus Christ! The One who declared his personal name as YHWH took up residence with us!

Fourth, look at what Jesus said of himself (John 10:11)...

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The New Testament word for *shepherd* is poimen. It means precisely what the Old Testament word for *shepherd* found in Psalm 23:1 means...exactly the same. It points to the one who provides for and protects the flock...the one who tends, guides, and feeds the flock...either literally with sheep or figuratively with people. And yup, you guessed it, when the translators of the ancient Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament looked for the right word to translate the Hebrew word for shepherd, raw-aw, they simply chose the verbal form of poimen.

The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want.
Jesus is my shepherd. I shall not want.
God Almighty is my shepherd. I shall not want.

Application

Centuries upon centuries upon centuries before the incarnation of the Son of God, the second member of the Trinity, King David was inspired by God himself to write about God himself...the Great Shepherd... YHWH...Yahweh. After the birth of Jesus, after his life and ministry, and after his death and resurrection, Paul the Apostle and one of his ministry partners, Luke, themselves inspired by God, also wrote about God...and they knew him as Jesus, the Messiah, God with us, the Lord, YHWH, Yahweh, the Great Shepherd. What about you?

