

The Great Shepherd of the Sheep (Mark 6:30-56)

11.26.17

The Lord Is My Shepherd

In verse 34 of today's passage, Mark makes a statement that forms the theme of this morning's sermon. When Jesus sees the large and growing multitude gathering upon the shore, a crowd which Mark informs us Jesus was trying to get away from in order to provide for His disciples some much needed rest (6:31-32), Jesus responds not with exasperation or frustration, but with compassion. Mark writes,

When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. (6:34)

Jesus did not see people as an inconvenience, He saw them as shepherdless sheep – harassed and helpless before the ravages of sin and the curse. And He desired to be their shepherd.

This has always been God's preferred relationship to His people, as evidenced by the multitude of times this shepherd-sheep imagery appears throughout the Bible. In undoubtedly the best-known and best-loved Psalm in the Bible, the LORD is likened to a shepherd whose provision for the sheep of His flock is perfect:

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
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.*

*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. (Ps. 23:1-6)*

Everything a sheep needs for its journey through the wilderness and into its eternal home, the shepherd is faithful to provide. The goodness and mercy of the shepherd ensures the salvation and eternal joy of the sheep. And the sheep walks without fear in absolute trust in the shepherd's goodness and mercy and unfailing care. That is the Old Testament ideal.

Unfortunately, that ideal was not realized in Israel. God entrusted His flock to undershepherds who were neither good nor merciful, and who failed to care for His sheep. In Ezekiel 34, God curses the shepherds of Israel (godless kings, faithless priests, false prophets) for failing to care for His sheep.

Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they are scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. (Ezek. 34:2-6)

But God promised that one day He Himself would come, the good shepherd, and He would rescue His scattered flock.

For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. (Ezek. 34:11-16)

And then comes Jesus, who announces Himself as the good shepherd who has come for the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 15:24). Unlike all of the false shepherds who came before, Jesus feeds the sheep. He cares for the sheep. He binds up their wounds. He heals their diseases. And He dies for the sheep, to rescue them from the ravages of sin and the curse.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep." (John 10:11, 14-15; cf. Isa. 53:6)

And He did. At the cross of Calvary, the good shepherd laid down His life to save the sheep He loves. And on the third day, He took it up again.

“No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.” (John 10:18)

Jesus Christ is the great shepherd of the sheep, whom the God of peace brought up again from the dead by the blood of the eternal covenant (Heb. 13:20). That is who He is. That is His heart; that is His self-identity in relation to lost and harassed and helpless sinners.

Look at Mark 6:34, and marvel. And hope. The Son of God, who called the cosmos into existence by the word of His power, looks upon you with compassion. He is not distant; He is not unfeeling; He is not uncaring. He is a good shepherd – the great shepherd of the sheep. And He desires to be your shepherd. He looks on you in compassion, because you are lost and harassed and helpless, a sheep without a shepherd. And He is seeking you, to find you and to save you, to bind up your wounds, to heal your disease, to carry you on His strong shoulders, and to shepherd your soul to its eternal home in the house of the LORD. Do you know Him as your shepherd? Is that the nature of the relationship that you have with Him? Intimate, tender, personal, caring...? This morning I urge you, come to your shepherd. Come as a little sheep, harassed and helpless, hurting and lost. Come to the shepherd of your soul (1 Pet. 2:25).

Mark 6:34 and this imagery of Jesus as the great Shepherd of the sheep is the backdrop against which I want us to view this morning’s passage. Each paragraph – three in the ESV (v. 30-44; v. 45-52; v. 53-55), but four in some formulations¹ (v. 30-32; v. 33-44; v. 45-52; v. 53-55) – shows Jesus as the Shepherd of His people, providing for them what they need out of His boundless compassion, His goodness and mercy. We will take each portrait in turn.

The Good Shepherd Gives Rest to His Weary Sheep

The first portrait shows the good shepherd providing His weary sheep with rest. In Mark 6:7-13, Jesus sent out the twelve to preach the gospel of the kingdom, to cast out demons, and to heal those who were sick. We do not know how long they were gone, but the tone of Jesus’ instructions (6:10-11) gives the impression that it was quite some time. In verse 30, they return:

The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. (6:30-32)

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul. (Ps. 23:1-3a)*

Mark 6:30-32 provides a portrait of the good shepherd giving his tired and weary sheep rest.

As I was writing this sermon, I had trouble putting my finger on why exactly I like these verses so much. What is it about Jesus’ words that touch me? And then it struck me... Jesus has more compassion on me than I have upon myself. I am so often tired... weary... exhausted.

¹ Cf. William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 224. I concur with Lane’s view.

I drive myself hard, I strive for perfection, I demand discipline out of myself and others. And I tend to think that Jesus is like me only more demanding, more rigorous, and more disciplined. Therefore, I rarely feel I measure up, and I rarely feel license to rest. But I had to ask myself, where in life do I experience anything resembling green pastures and still waters where my soul is restored? That is what Psalm 23 says the shepherd does for His sheep. That is what Jesus did for His disciples here in Mark 6. And notice that their rest is with Jesus. That is what makes it restful and restorative for the soul. “Come away by yourselves... *with Me*.” He didn’t send them on an all-expenses paid vacation while He continued to do the work of the ministry. He took them away with Him.² What do you suppose the disciples did when they were alone with Jesus? I suspect they talked about their journeys, they asked Him questions, they ate and laughed together. They rested in the presence of their good and merciful and joyful shepherd.

Do you rest with Jesus? What in your life resembles the experience of laying down in green pastures and beside still waters, where your soul is restored in faith and strength and joy? Your shepherd is not a cruel taskmaster, like Pharaoh who demanded bricks but offered no straw. George Müller, the great Baptist of Bristol, England, who pastored the same church for sixty-six years and founded orphanages all over England funded solely through prayer – he never solicited a dime³ - was famous for his devotional life. In his autobiography, he had this to say about green pastures, still waters, and the rest of the soul:

“While I was staying at Nailsworth, it pleased the Lord to teach me a truth, irrespective of human instrumentality, as far as I know, the benefit of which I have not lost, though now . . . more than forty years have passed away. The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not, how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished. For I might seek to set the truth before the unconverted, I might seek to benefit believers, I might seek to relieve the distressed, I might in other ways to behave myself as it becomes a child of God in this world; and yet, not being happy in the Lord, and not being nourished and strengthened in my inner man day by day, all this might not be attended to in a right spirit.”⁴

Before all ministry, before all service, before all teaching or preaching, my foremost duty is to delight myself in God – to lay down His green pastures, to side beside His still waters, and to have Him restore my soul. And according to Müller, the primary way this happens is through the word of God.

“Now I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God and to meditation upon it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reprovèd, instructed; and that thus, whilst

² It appears from the text of Mark that their rest was interrupted by the crowds who, according to v. 33 “got there ahead of them” (ἐκεῖ καὶ προῆλθον αὐτούς). This, too, was part of Jesus’ plan, demonstrating that Jesus’ compassion upon the crowds overlooked the inconvenience of their presence. Yet, I believe that if Jesus said they needed rest, He must have provided it.

³ John Piper, *A Camaraderie of Confidence: The Fruit of Unfailing Faith in the Lives of Charles Spurgeon, George Müller, and Hudson Taylor* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 63, 65.

⁴ *Autobiography of George Müller*, comp. Fred Bergen (London: J. Nisbet, 1906), 152-154, quoted in John Piper, *Desiring God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2011, orig. 1986), 154.

meditating, my heart might be brought into experimental, communion with the Lord.”⁵

In the coming year, I am going to make it my aim – and I invite you to join me – to follow my good and merciful shepherd to green pastures and still waters of restorative rest, where my soul can find happiness and joy in God, where I cease from my striving and my labors and rest in His provision, and where I can be nourished and strengthened for the next lap of ministry. Jesus is not glorified in weary, exhausted, dutiful yet joyless slaves. Weary and exhausted people have nothing to offer a weary and exhausted world. Jesus is glorified in happy, joyful, well-rested servants who are filled up to overflowing that they may pour out on a weary and exhausted world. We will kick around in Connect next week as to how this might look in our lives, but I suspect it involves food and drink, fellowship and friends, sleep and recreation. These things are the nourishment of the body. And it involves the word of God, which is the food of the soul. And to this point we now turn.

The Good Shepherd Gives Food to His Starving Sheep

The second portrait shows the good shepherd giving His starving sheep food. Look now beginning at verse 33:

Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. (6:33-44)

To understand the point of this miracle, and Mark’s purpose in recording it, two points need to be made.

First, everything about this miracle – the setting, the language, the arrangement of the crowd – calls to mind Moses and the manna in the wilderness during the exodus of Israel. And I think that is quite intentional. Mark is careful to state three times in this narrative that this miracle takes place in a “desolate” place – literally, a “wilderness” (ἐρημος – 6:35; cf. 6:31, 32). This calls to mind the wilderness journey of Israel during which time God fed them in the wilderness with miracle bread. The regimented way in which Jesus commands the crowd to sit

⁵ Müller, in Piper, *A Camaraderie of Confidence*, 155.

(6:40) reflects the order of the Israelite camp in the wilderness (cf. Ex. 18:21, 25).⁶ Furthermore, in John's account of this miracle, Jesus makes this connection explicit, saying,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." (John 6:32-33)

So the feeding of the five thousand is an acted parable in which Jesus shows those with eyes to see that He is a new Moses, feeding a new Israel the bread of life in the wilderness, as He shepherds His people in a new exodus from the bondage of slavery to sin into a new promised land – the kingdom of God.

But secondly, this miracle is not primarily about the physical bread. Notice again the precise wording of verse 34 – *"When he went ashore he saw the great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. **And he began to teach them many things.**"* Just as in the days of Moses, the true bread is not that which fills their stomachs; the true manna in the wilderness is that which nourishes their souls. In Deuteronomy 8:3, Moses said to the people of Israel,

"And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deut. 8:3)

The manna was not the main point; the word of the LORD was the main point. If the people of Israel were to truly live, they needed to feed on the word of the LORD in addition to the manna that He provided. The same is true in Mark 6. The people are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd," and so Jesus feeds them – He first teaches them many things, and then He feeds them manna in the wilderness. Everyone went home that day satisfied in their stomachs (6:42), but only a few went home restored in their souls. Again, we'll refer to the apostle John, who saw this connection and recorded Jesus' interaction the next day with the same crowd:

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." (John 6:26-27)

So, it all together, what we have in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is an acted parable in which Jesus, the good shepherd, feeds his starving sheep, but not in the way we might first expect. The bread is not the main point. That is not what starving sheep need most. They need the bread of life, which the Son of Man will give them. They need the word in the wilderness. And so do you. Do not work for the food which perishes. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Your shepherd will feed you in the wilderness of this world. Just as He commanded them to sit on the green grass (6:39), so He will make you to lie down in green pastures (Ps. 23:1). He will restore your soul, but you must take and eat. And if

⁶ Lane, 229.

you do, you will find that His provision will never run out. If we truly understood how vital the word of God is to the health and sustenance of our souls, no one would ever need to prod us to read our Bibles, or to come and hear the word preached and taught. We would hunger for it as we hunger for our daily meals. Beloved, your soul will starve without this food, and you will perish in the wilderness. So take, eat, and be filled.

The Good Shepherd Gives Faith to His Faithless Sheep

The third portrait shows the good shepherd giving His faithless sheep a vision of His divine sovereignty and power.

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them⁷, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. (6:45-52)

After the long day of teaching and the miracle of the bread, Jesus immediately compelled (ἠνάγκασεν⁸) His disciples to get into the boat without Him and cross to Bethsaida.⁹ He then went up on one of the mountains overlooking the Sea of Galilee in order to pray. In the aftermath of a day of intensive ministry, Jesus needed to restore His soul in God as well. But on their voyage, the disciples ran into a strong headwind and a rough sea (cf. Matt. 14:26; John 6:18), such that they were making little headway, and were, in fact, being blown off course (for they were heading east to Bethsaida, but wound up in Gennesaret to the south and west¹⁰). From His vantage point, evidently Jesus could see them straining at the oars (βασανιζομένους – lit. “tormenting themselves”) in futility. And so He came to them... in the middle of the Sea of Galilee... at 3:00 in the morning (the fourth watch of the night was 3:00-6:00 a.m.)... walking on the water. Well, this leaves the disciples utterly undone. They are terrified, thinking that Jesus is a ghost (φάντασμα). But Jesus allayed their fears by speaking to them – “Take heart; it is I. Do

⁷ This strange phrase could be translated “He wished to come alongside them” (ἤθελεν παρελθεῖν αὐτούς). Or, it could be an allusion to Ex. 33:19, 22 and 1 Kings 19:11 where the LORD “passed by” Moses and Elijah, thus revealing His divine glory, which is what Jesus was doing for His disciples. Cf. Lane, 236; Edwards, 198-199; John MacArthur, *Mark 1-8*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 329-330.

⁸ The verb implies that the disciples did not want to go. Cf. Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. & Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 81.

⁹ Cf. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 194-195, 197, for a discussion of the revolutionary overtones of this passage (cf. John 6:15) and the probability that Jesus immediately and forcefully removed the disciples from scene to prevent them from being corrupted by the revolutionary zeal.

¹⁰ Edwards, 202.

not be afraid.” And he got into the boat with them (after Peter walked out to meet him, according to Matt. 14:28-32), and the wind immediately ceased. And Matthew tells us that *“those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’”* (Matt. 14:33). If that sounds contradictory to their reaction in Mark, it is not. Mark 6:52 is explaining why the disciples were astounded by Jesus. They were astounded because they had not understood about the loaves, but rather that their hearts had been hardened. They did not grasp that just as God had given manna in the wilderness, so now Jesus was giving bread in the wilderness – therefore, Jesus is God, and is worthy of worship. Their hearts had been hardened (πεπωρωμένη – perfect tense), but they were hardened no longer.

Now, what is the point of this miracle? Why does Jesus do this? I don’t think it is simply, “Well, the quickest way from point A to point B is a straight line across the water.” I think Jesus orchestrated this event in order to display His divine power to His disciples for the benefit of their faith. Four textual points lead me to this conclusion:

- First, the fact that Jesus walked across the sea is itself an astounding display of divine sovereignty and power. Only the God who commands nature can so bend the laws of nature to accomplish such a feat (cf. Job 9:8; 38:16; Ps. 77:19; Isa. 43:16).
- Second, the way Jesus speaks to the disciples reveals His divine identity. “It is I” (ἐγώ εἰμι) is literally translated, “I am.” That particularly unique way Jesus has of identifying Himself in the Gospels, identical to the way God identified Himself to Moses in the Old Testament (Ex. 3:14). It is the name of God – Yahweh.¹¹
- Third, the fact that the wind ceased immediately upon Jesus entering the boat further displays His divine sovereignty and power over the forces of nature.
- Fourth, although Mark does not record it, in Matthew the disciples respond to this incredible display of divine power by worshiping Jesus and declaring, “Truly you are the Son of God.” In other words, point taken.

Mark states in v. 52 that the disciples had not understood the miracle of the loaves, but rather that their hearts had been hardened. So the good shepherd gives to his faithless sheep what they need – a vision of His divine sovereignty and power. And their hearts were hardened no longer. They worshiped Him as the Son of God.

If you are to trust in Jesus as your good shepherd, you need to know that He wields this kind of power. My faith in Jesus in the midst of storms will only be as strong as my faith in His divine sovereignty and power over the storms. If I am to trust Jesus in the midst of the raging wind and waves, I need to be convinced of His power over the wind and the waves. If I am to trust in the good shepherd to lead me through the valley of the shadow of death, I need to be convinced that He has conquered death and holds the keys of life and death in the palm of His hand. It is important to know that your shepherd is compassionate; it is equally important to know that your shepherd is strong and capable of bringing you safely through every danger. And that is the point of this miracle. I can think of no other reason why Jesus did this, than to establish in the eyes of His disciples – His sheep – His absolute deity.

The Good Shepherd Gives Healing to His Suffering Sheep

The fourth portrait shows the good shepherd healing His suffering sheep.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him

¹¹ Edwards, 198.

and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well. (6:53-56)

This paragraph functions as one of Mark's summary statements of Jesus' ministry in a certain region (cf. 1:39; 3:7-12), this time in Gennesaret, which was a fertile plain on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee between Capernaum and Tiberius.¹²

The main point of this paragraph is obvious. Jesus is the good shepherd who has come to heal His suffering sheep, to bind up their wounds and heal their diseases, just like God said He would in Ezekiel 34:

"I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..." (Ezek. 34:15-16)

So full of grace and compassion is Jesus that it seems to overflow from Him and spill out on suffering people. Just picture the scene in v. 56 – Jesus walking through a crowded marketplace, filled with people lying on their pallets, groaning in pain and misery, lifting up their feeble, emaciated, outstretched hands to just touch the fringe (κρασπέδου – tassel¹³) of His garment. And instantly, they are healed (σώζω – lit. "saved"). Everywhere He goes, everywhere He walks, He leaves healing in His train. It is incredible. Jesus heals His suffering sheep.

When Jesus looked out at the masses, He saw that they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." And He had compassion on them. Are you harassed and helpless? Are you weary? Starving? Are you fearful, anxious, worried? Are you hurting, in pain and misery? Lift up your eyes, for the great shepherd of the sheep is passing by. Stretch out your feeble hand of faith and touch Him. He will not mind. He will heal; He will save. That is why He has come.

¹² Edwards, 201-203; Lane, 239-240.

¹³ The tassels sewn on the four corners of the outer garments as reminders of the commandments of God; cf. Edwards, 203, and 164, note 36.