

A SONG OF THE SHEPHERD

Songs Of The Savior-Our Messiah Revealed In The Psalms

by Doug Goins

**Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth.
Serve the LORD with gladness;**

**Come before Him with joyful singing.
Know that the LORD Himself is God;**

**It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.**

**Enter His gates with thanksgiving,
And His courts with praise.
Give thanks to Him; bless His name.**

**For the LORD is good;
His lovingkindness is everlasting,
And His faithfulness to all generations.**

Last year I read about a little church in Detroit that got cited by the police for exceeding legal decibel levels in their worship services. Perhaps there was just too much joyful shouting and singing and too much energy and too much volume and too much thankful praise bouncing off the walls of the neighborhood. That news story made me laugh, because looking back over my seventeen years at PBC, seven of which I served as pastor of worship and arts, I can't imagine our ever getting busted for excessive exuberance in our worship services! And apparently we are not alone in being a bit inhibited in our worship, because this psalm was written as an exhortation to the people of Israel to worship God enthusiastically.

It is exuberance to which we are called in this psalm. There is no way to get by it. When it comes to corporate services of worship and praise, this hymn commands us to worship God, the Good Shepherd, with physical energy, with focused intensity, wholeheartedly, at full throttle. What we're really called to be in relation to the Shepherd-God is noisy sheep! (I am not at all encouraging criminal activity or an assault on our neighborhoods with public address systems, though.)

Psalm 100 is the last of eight psalms, 93 through 100, that encourage and remind both Israel and us to worship God as Creator, King, Judge, Warrior, Revealer of Truth, and Good Shepherd. They are called enthronement psalms, and in them we bow down and reverence the King seated on his throne in his sovereign reign, in his dominion and majesty. He is the Sovereign of the created universe, as far as the Hubbell telescope can see and beyond. He is the absolute Sovereign of our planet, of human history, and of our own personal history. All of these psalms put us flat on our faces before him.

There is a simple, two-part structure to the five verses of Psalm 100. In verses 1 and 2 and then again in verse 4, we are called to praise God and worship him. That is followed in verses 3 and 5 with a listing of wonderful reasons why we are to praise and worship our Good Shepherd in terms of his character and activity.

Joyful noise in worshipping God

In verses 1, 2, and 4 there is a concept that occurs three times, defining the heart of worship: We are called to express gratitude to our Great Shepherd. The superscription says this is a psalm for thanksgiving. And we are to

"Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth."

We are to

"Serve the LORD with gladness;
Come before Him with joyful singing."

We are to

"Enter His gates with thanksgiving,
And his courts with praise.
Give thanks to Him; bless His name."

Now, this is not all the biblical revelation there is on thanksgiving and praise in worship. There is also a place for quiet meditation, even for solitude in worship. We are told to be still and know that he is our God. I think of the beautiful picture of the quiet physical worship of Mary Magdalene at the feet of Jesus, washing his feet in gratitude with her tears, anointing them with oil, and drying them with her own hair.

But in this psalm we verbally celebrate God's kingship, his rule and reign in our own lives. We are called to have clear memories and conscious awareness of God's activity for us and in us and through us, in everything we do. Peterson said in his paraphrase of this psalm that we are to enter with the password "Thank you" on our hearts and on our lips.

In verse 1 this worship is wonderfully noisy: We're told to shout. In verse 2 we're to come with singing, not just in our hearts but with our voices, at the top of our lungs. In verse 4, the praise and blessing of his name is verbal. We're called to sing to God the truth about himself with incredible energy and enthusiasm. There are three things that struck me about gratitude in public worship in these verses.

First, the problem the psalmist is addressing in verse 1 is one of inhibition or self-consciousness, which most of us are prone to. We are concerned about what we look like and what people will think of us. We have a pretty cerebral culture here, so this sort of exuberance doesn't come naturally to most of us. But thinking of the kind of energy Psalm 100 calls us to brought to mind the Forty-Niners games I go to at Candlestick Park once a year. There are no worship leaders there exhorting seventy thousand people to energy and noise. But there is an incredible volume level, enthusiasm, and excitement about what the 'Niners are doing. That's the kind of noise that we're called to make in worshipping our God!

The second thing that struck me is that this noise is happy, our service and worship are done with gladness, and our singing is joyful. Carl Gallivan and I were in a prison in Mexico a few years ago as part of a worship service for about a hundred prisoners. There was incredible noise from a drum set, guitars, and a keyboard. But instead of joy there was a grim intensity. They were doing battle; it was worship as warfare. There was no joyful sense that the King had already won the battle. It was disconcerting to sit there for over an hour and never experience any expression of the joy of the Spirit through their worship.

Joy and gladness are paramount in our worship. Again going back to the Forty-Niners, I remember the joy in Candlestick one December Sunday afternoon in 1994 after they had won the NFC Championship and beaten Dallas (their great rival). George Seifert and Jerry Rice and Steve Young stood on the dugout, and nobody left the stadium. The fans were joyfully exalting what these guys had done with incredible enthusiasm.

The call here is to enjoy the work of offering God our worship. "Serve the LORD your God" in other translations is "Worship the LORD your God." The specific Hebrew word means our physical activity when we're gathered at a worship service, not the lifestyle of worship. There is another word that says we are to express worship of God with our entire life. But this word means singing, praying, and body language that express gratitude and appreciation.

The problem here is that we come into worship in the spirit of Eeyore in *Winnie the Pooh*, or perhaps Telly

Monster in *Sesame Street*: "O-o-h, I love you and worship you, but things are pretty bad, and they may get worse...." Put yourself in the Lord's place when he has to listen to that and respond to it. I was thinking about being served in a restaurant by a waiter or waitress. Today in most restaurants creativity is the byword in waiting tables as to the manner of presenting the menu and so forth. But imagine being served by someone whose manner is hang-dog, dejected, and moping: "I know that you deserve the best possible service and attention, and although it is my great honor and privilege to serve you, it's been a terrible day, so please don't expect a lot from me. My energy level is shot." Or even worse, imagine someone who serves you but seems angry about the whole thing, saying through gritted teeth: "I'm just doing this because I have to. It's the right thing to do." That is often what the Lord lovingly hears from us. There is no joy.

The third thing that struck me is that gratitude in worship is focused completely on God and on nothing else. Our shouts in verse 1 are to *the* Lord. In verse 2 we are to serve *the Lord*, to come before *him*. In verse 4 we are to enter *his* gates and *his* courts with praise; the thanks belong to *him*, and we are to bless *his* name. Our struggle here is self-centeredness. We come into worship demanding a certain kind of experience so that *our* needs are met. We're the sheep, but we think we are in charge! Yet what fills the purview of this psalmist is God and his greatness and goodness and blessing. That counters self-centeredness in worship.

The three issues that are pulled together in these verses--noise, joy, and being totally focused on the Lord in corporate worship--were fulfilled for me most completely on a trip that PBC's pastoral staff took to West Africa in 1979. Bud Ortlund (who was on staff here at the time) and I went to do a conference in the city of Iloren, Nigeria. We were guests in an Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) congregation. I remember standing on a hill on a beautiful Sunday morning in a building bigger than our facility here. About two thousand people came streaming up the hill from many different directions (there were no cars).

The first thing that struck me was that these people sang as they walked up the hill. There were lots of hugs and kisses outside as people were gathering. Inside the church the men and women were separated, men on one side and women on the other. Another thing that struck me was that the church was full ten minutes early. People were praying, reading their Bibles, singing softly. Then when the service started, it was glorious! The music was led by a choir of about fifty young people on one side of the platform and another choir of forty or fifty women on the other side. In the middle were about fifteen musicians playing different kinds of African drums, guitars, basses, and a harp-like instrument. There was no worship leader, just a spontaneous leading. The music was not Western Christian praise music, but West African music--a blend of reggae, calypso, gospel, and rhythm and blues. It was wonderfully infectious as the people sang and swayed. It was a rhythm that expressed who they were before the Lord.

When it came to preaching, I have never been in a group of people who were so actively involved. Everybody had a Bible, and they were all open as Bud preached. He talked afterward about how much fun it was to preach to those people, even through a translator. They exercised incredible active listening.

To me that summarizes what we are called to in Psalm 100---to come with thanksgiving motivating our worship, being wonderfully noisy, overwhelmingly happy, and totally focused on God and his goodness and his activity.

God is the absolutely sovereign leader of his people. Over and over again in the Old Testament that leadership is described in terms of shepherding his sheep. We're going to examine now the character and activity of the Good Shepherd, which are ultimately fulfilled in the life and ministry and ongoing presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. Verses 3 and 5:

"Know that the LORD Himself is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

...For the LORD is good;
His lovingkindness is everlasting,
And His faithfulness to all generations."

Here is the rationale, the motivation for all the noisy, joyful, worshipful exuberance in verses 1, 2, and 4.

Worship based on knowledge

The word "know" which begins verse 3 is very important, setting the tone for everything that follows. It means experiential knowledge held with absolute certainty, beyond a shadow of a doubt. So our worship is thoughtful, intelligent, involving intellectual conviction based on truth, on faith in who God is and what God says about himself.

In these two verses there are seven wonderful reasons why we worship *Yahweh* God as our Good Shepherd. The first one is, "...The LORD Himself is God...." We worship because we know with absolute certainty who is God. "The LORD Himself" speaks of his absolutely unique identity. *Yahweh* is his covenant name, the name given to his chosen people Israel for him exclusively. He is the only true God; there are no rival chief shepherds over all the earth. He is the only one with that expanse of authority. His name speaks of ultimate responsibility and authority over everything.

The second phrase in verse 3 tells us that we worship because we know with absolute certainty where we come from: "It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves." The psalmist is not speaking here of the act of creating the world, but of God's sovereign activity in constituting the people of Israel-their salvation history, their redemption from bondage in Egypt, the covenant relationship he initiated with them at Mount Sinai, his leading them safely through the forty years of wilderness wandering, and then his settling them into the Promised Land. Every saving event in the Old Testament is described at some point in the language of shepherding: God chose, rescued, led, pastured, and guarded them. An important point here is that Israel was not a self-constituted flock or community. They were chosen by God, partly because it's not the nature of sheep to organize themselves and lead themselves. Sheep need a leader.

On my birthday last September I turned fifty, and I got a lot of great birthday cards. One of my favorites was a Gary Larson card that illustrates this point about the nature of sheep. It shows a bunch of sheep at a cocktail party. A "man" and "woman" sheep are sitting and talking. He says to her, "Well, what do you know-I'm a follower too." Inside it says, "Have a happy birthday, I mean, if everybody else thinks you should." That's the nature of sheep-to follow a leader who has brought them together as a flock.

Last week I was reading in Psalm 80, another psalm composed by the choirmaster Asaph (as is Psalm 78, which we studied in Discovery Paper 4425). He opens this way:

"Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock;
you who sit enthroned between the cherubim...."

There he combines the two identities of God as Sovereign, enthroned in majesty, and as the caring, involved Shepherd of the people he has chosen.

The third phrase is in the middle of verse 3: "We are His people...." We worship because we know with absolute certainty to whom we belong. John 10 makes very clear that God is not a hired hand. No, our great Good Shepherd is the owner-proprietor of this vast sheep-herding enterprise. Psalm 95:7 also says,

"And we are the people of His pasture,
And the sheep of His hand."

He holds us safely. This speaks of both identity and personal safety and security.

We have a little dog that we got four years ago, when he was about a year old, by the mercy of Phyllis Fletcher, who rescued him. So we named him Fletcher. When we got Fletcher he had been beaten and had been owned by a number of different people. He was a sick, dysfunctional little dog. He would bite people and get really scared if you even looked at him too quickly. But it is amazing the way he has calmed down and quieted through four years of being loved by our family. He doesn't snap anymore. He doesn't flinch when

you look at him. He has a great sense of ownership. He knows that I'm "the leader of the pack." He's not scared of me, but obedient and trusting. Fletcher knows now that he's a Goins! He knows who he belongs to, and he's a very secure little dog.

That is what our Good Shepherd does for us in terms of our identity, safety, and security. "We are his people" is a beautiful picture of knowing where our ownership lies; of being possessed, cherished, and cared for by God. And the result is that we dwell in safety and security.

The last phrase in verse 3 tells us that we worship because we know with absolute certainty how privileged our relationship to him is: "...And [we are] the sheep of His pasture." Old Testament shepherds took phenomenally good care of their sheep.

Whenever we think of that imagery, we are drawn inevitably to Psalm 23. More than any other passage of Scripture, it is the psalm of *Yahweh* as the Good Shepherd of his sheep. I want to commend to you a sermon by Dorman Followwill on Psalm 23 entitled *My Shepherd is Enough* (Discovery Paper 7120). It is a wonderful, rich examination of that psalm. I also want to remind you of the truth in that psalm about safety and security and identity and worth. Last week I found this translation of Psalm 23 by Ron Allen, who teaches at Western Seminary in Portland. It is his own personal, free translation:

"*Yahweh* is my shepherd,
I do not lack.
In verdant pastures he causes me to lie down;
By waters of quietness he gently leads me.
He refreshes my being;
He leads me in well-worn paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.

Even if I were to walk through a valley of deep darkness,
I will not fear evil; for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You arrange before me a table in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint with oil my head;

My cup is overflowing.
Surely goodness and loyal love will pursue me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of *Yahweh* forever."

That brings us now to verse 5 of Psalm 100. We are told that we worship because we know with absolute certainty how good God is to us: "The LORD is good...." Psalm 23 surveys God's active goodness on our behalf: He gives us rest, allowing us to lie down in safety and security. He leads us along through life carefully, gently. The Lord never drives us but invites us to follow him. He constantly renews and restores and refreshes us. He is with us through everything. He guards and protects us. And he comforts us.

I had the great privilege last week of watching the active goodness of our Shepherd-God at work in bringing a godly young couple suffering from infertility together with a pregnant single mother who was in difficult circumstances. This birth mother made a very painful decision, trusting the goodness of her Shepherd-God to choose this couple to be the adoptive parents of her beautiful little girl who was born on Tuesday evening. For two days I was a part of an amazing circle of love with this birth mother, the adoptive parents, and the grandfather of the baby girl. It was said a number of times that God was at work, amazingly and overwhelmingly. God was loving, good, faithful. We prayed together Wednesday night before the adoptive parents took the newborn home. Everyone around the circle wept. There were tears of joy as well as conflict inside over painful choices and the uncertainty of what lay ahead for the birth mother, and for the adoptive parents. It was very moving for me to be able to pray and commend this little newborn lamb, as well as each parent and the grandparents, to the tender care of the Good Shepherd.

That takes us to the next phrase in verse 5: "His lovingkindness is everlasting...." Ron Allen called this loyal love. We worship God because we know with absolute certainty how much he loves us. God's goodness,

even in the life of these people with whom I spent time last week, is not just driven by a vague altruism or some cosmic commitment to the good as a philosophical concept. No, God is a loving Shepherd, and love is very personal. It is focused, purposeful, and intimate, and it never gives up. This is sacrificial love that goes all-out for the good of the beloved sheep. Throughout the Old Testament good shepherds are described as those who are willing to sacrifice their lives for the safety of the sheep. Again, we see this in John 10. Bad shepherds don't take any chances because they value their lives too much, so they run away when danger arises. But a good shepherd is willing to die for the sake of the sheep in his care. Remember Jesus' story in Luke 15 of that kind of stubborn, pursuing love in the shepherd who is looking for the one lost sheep, risking his own life, going into the wilderness all alone to find it. That is the primary characteristic of the Good Shepherd—he loves and loves, no matter what the cost.

I saw that pursuing love of God at work last week in a dear young woman who is fairly new to PBC. She told me that for the last twelve years she has struggled with estrangement from God, after having had a vibrant faith as a high school and college student. She had been active in fellowship and ministry, but then some very difficult circumstances overwhelmed her. In some sense, she was a victim of things she had no control over. But she said she compounded them by making sinful choices and unwise decisions herself. She lived with this sense of distance from God for many years.

A few months ago she started to come back to the Lord, to seek him and people who loved him. She said that it was hard to come back into fellowship after being gone for a long time. She had been here at PBC for a few weeks, but she still felt the distance. But she told me an amazing story: Last Sunday morning she came into the auditorium for church and asked God to somehow communicate his love for her in a tangible way. Do you know what God did? He seated her next to a spiritually sensitive woman in our body who initiated a conversation with this young woman. The woman was easy to talk to, very open and vulnerable. In God's providential care, she turned out to be a good friend of a nurse who was the one person in the last two years who had given this young woman good spiritual counsel about some deep issues. She told me, "I couldn't believe it, this lady knew my friend. They were friends!" She told me how clearly she saw God expressing his love for her, pursuing her, never giving up even after her twelve years of running away. That is the kind of loving Shepherd-God we serve.

The last phrase in verse 5 says that we worship God because we know with absolute certainty that he is loyal to us always: "...And His faithfulness to all generations [is everlasting]." Our Good Shepherd is a covenant-keeping God. He is not fickle or faithless; he doesn't change his mind. His word is absolutely dependable. This conclusion to the psalm broadens our horizons, lengthens our view, and raises our expectations. From generation to generation he remains the same. From everlasting to everlasting he is God. Not just through our life but clear into eternity itself, his character and his nature will not change. We can be sure that he will stay with us and will never abandon his sheep. The sheep are eternally safe and secure in the powerful arms of the shepherd.

A number of people have written great hymns out of Psalm 100, but I was struck with the majestic text of one by Isaac Watts, *Before Jehovah's Aweful Throne*. I especially love the closing stanza:

"Before Jehovah's aweful [awesome] throne
Wide as the world is Thy command,
Vast as eternity Thy love,
Firm as a rock Thy truth shall stand
When rolling years shall cease to move."

Jesus our great shepherd

Hebrews 13:20, 21 says, "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." That New Testament writer saw the ministry of this Old Testament Shepherd-King fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the messianic Savior who was and continues to be the Great Shepherd of the sheep.

Twice in John 10 Jesus himself claimed to be this true Shepherd of the sheep. A reflective Jewish listener who was listening closely to the teachings of Jesus at that point would have been stunned at the audacity of Jesus' claim. When Jesus called himself that Good Shepherd, he was basically saying, "I am God. I am the one being spoken of in all those Old Testament passages about the Shepherd-King."

But in his audacity there is also a mark of his humiliation-when he calls himself a shepherd, it is in the context of being willing to die for his sheep. Listen again to that commitment in John 10:11-18:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep...I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep...For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

These words are amazing. Jesus was declaring that he was the Good Shepherd, but in his case it was a mark of death. This was a Shepherd who would have to die for his sheep, expressing his suffering and sacrificial love.

But he would die voluntarily, and he promised that he would live again. Jesus predicted ahead of time a love triumphant and victorious. So Jesus anticipated both the cross and the resurrection. Even though he would be executed as a common criminal, his body fastened to a wooden cross with bloody nails, he made it clear that he and he alone had the authority to lay down his life and take it up again. Jesus wasn't hounded to death or crucified against his will. He could have prevented his death and suffering, but willingly, decisively, he obeyed his Father to the end. These are the elements of the gospel in nutshell: Jesus died for his own, then he was raised in newness of life. And Jesus composed this symphony of salvation in John 10 from all the shepherd song themes in the Old Testament, blending them together beautifully.

The response of the people who heard Jesus sing this shepherd song of salvation shows that his words were very controversial. John 10:19-21:

There arose a division again among the Jews because of these words. And many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?" Others were saying, "These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?"

Out of those verses come three options for responding to what Jesus said: He was demon-possessed, which makes him dangerous, threatening, and frightening. Or he was insane, which means he is an embarrassment to us and ought to be pitied. Or he was telling the truth; he was talking about life itself. People are still divided over Jesus today. The great majority say, "Why pay any attention to him? This isn't the first century A.D. We're almost in the twenty-first century. We don't need a shepherd-savior today. Jesus is irrelevant. And how can one man's death on a cross two thousand years ago have any meaning for my life today?" Other people say, "Jesus is ultimate reality. He has changed my life. I have found safety and security in his strong Shepherd arms of love. His loving sacrifice for me has resulted in forgiveness, reconciliation to God, and pardon from my sin. He has opened my blind eyes to spiritual reality. He really has become everything to me." Opinions on Jesus must divide and divide sharply, because he didn't leave any room for middle ground. We are either part of his flock or there is no flock. But once we examine the evidence and hear his voice, the only reasonable conclusion is that Jesus is who he says he is-the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep and continues to share that life with his own.

The all-important question is, what conclusion have you reached concerning Jesus who calls himself the Good Shepherd? If you haven't made a decision yet, remember that this in itself is a decision. In the last verse of Psalm 100 where the psalmist says God's lovingkindness is everlasting and his faithfulness extends to every generation, he clearly points into the future for the believer who commits his or her life to the mercy of this Shepherd. And the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd points to the future as well. The goal of all those Old Testament passages about this Shepherd-King was that they be fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ

as he is wonderfully revealed as the Great Shepherd.

Listen to these beautiful words of the prophet Micah about Jesus (Micah 5:4-5):

"He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach the ends of the earth.
And he will be their peace."

Jesus continues to offer security and peace of mind and heart. How beautiful is this picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd, the singer of the shepherd song!

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