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By David Fields

Who is your leader?

"I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning;...The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in metaphysics [a world beyond the material], he is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do, or why his friends should not seize political power and govern in the way that they find most advantageous to themselves... For myself... the philosophy of meaningless was essentially an instrument of liberation... sexual... [and] political."

There are good reasons, far better reasons in my view, to believe that the world has a Designer, and a design. And this Creator is the One who will love and care for us. And if we want to inhabit the world as it is, to live lined up with reality, we need to see that this world is made. There is a design. And that we can know the True leader that my heart needs.

Most famously, David begins Psalm 23 with the words – again with this deep sense of personal connection:
“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.” – Psalm 23:1-2

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I. Failed Leaders and the Good Shepherd

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In Ezekiel's time, the leaders – both faith leaders and political leaders – are hoarding resources for their own comfort. Neglecting to care for the weak, the sick, the injured. Neglecting to search out the lost. Being harsh and brutal.

And it begins with “Woe to you shepherds of Israel.” It turns out, **God cares a lot about leadership**. About the motives and methods of those who are called to care for communities – politically and spiritually.

What does a good Shepherd do? How does God “Shepherd” his people?

For those scattered and afraid, he will find them and provide for their physical needs. He will provide rest – a deep breath. He will “bind up the injured”, “strengthen the weak.” But notice too: those who have misused others, they will face his just judgment.

*“I will place over them **one shepherd**, my servant David, and he will tend them.” (Ezekiel 34:12).*

When Ezekiel writes this, David is long dead and buried. As it comes clear, and as I looked at in depth last week, Jesus is this “David” figure. The “New David”, who will tend the sheep.

It's no accident, then, that when Jesus comes on the scene, he describes himself as “the Good Shepherd.” This text in Ezekiel forms the background of so much of what Jesus is doing; how he's judging and replacing Israel's leaders.

II. Jesus, The Good Shepherd

“Very truly I tell **you Pharisees**, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but **the Pharisees** did not understand what he was telling them. – John 10:1-6

Who are the "thieves and robbers" that came before Jesus? It's the failed religious leaders in Ezekiel's time. Who is the "thief" who comes to "steal kill and destroy" in this text? The Pharisees – Israel's religious leaders in Jesus' moment. He's speaking directly to them.

This text isn't just a statement about Jesus holding little lambs in his arms. Certainly, we do see his love and care for us in it. But it's also an indictment, a judgment on failed religious leaders. It's a crack of thunder.

Lesslie Newbigin was a missionary and theologian, and in his commentary on John, he talks about the many leaders throughout history who have acted not as shepherds but as robbers: *"They do not follow the way of Jesus, which is – as we shall learn – the way of total self-giving. They 'climb up some other way.' It's not surprising that 'leadership' has become almost a term of abuse and that those who try to exercise leadership are almost universally assumed to be corrupt."*

– Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*

1. How does this relate to the bad leaders today? Is Jesus going to do the same type of thing to them as to the Pharisees?

And the answer? Yes. Every person will give an account for their actions, and as James says, leaders will be judged more severely. So, whenever that is, there is account given to God for what we do. That's why we can be free of seeking revenge and can simply forgive. Because God is the ultimate judge of bad leaders.

This text reveals the only way to know God's salvation and life; and it's only through Jesus. He's the "gate." He's the way in. There is no other.

So, the question we started with comes back now: who is your leader?

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2. A leader who loves you

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I would argue that you will not, you *cannot*, know life to its full until you come to know Jesus as your good Shepherd. We need to know we are loved. We need to know how to live. We need hope. And Jesus gives us all that. How?

He'll go on to say that unlike a hired hand who runs away at the first sign of trouble, leaving the sheep to scatter, he steps into harm's way. In fact, as he will say: "I lay down my life for the sheep." – John 10:15

In a twist of irony, the Good Shepherd is also the sacrificial lamb. Right in the introduction, John the Baptist says when he sees Jesus: "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." – John 1:19. This Shepherd loves us all the way to the grave, but as he says here: "Only to take it up again." – John 10:17b

Here's is a leader who loves us and **provides what we need most: forgiveness and restoration to God**. And we have a leader we can follow – who will show us how to live.

We have a leader we can trust. A leader we can follow, because this leader loves us all the way to the grave and back.

3. What about those who are leaders today?

When Jesus is our Good Shepherd, it means we should really love those leaders God appoints to be his "under-shepherds," but we even hold them a little loosely too. Like Jesus is the only *truly Good Shepherd*. Leaders will get things wrong at times. Don't I know it.

Jesus continues to call and empower leaders within his community. But those leaders are also simply following our one Good Shepherd. But those leaders are legitimate when they also take the way of the Good Shepherd. Not "climbing over a wall," but going through Jesus, and in his way.

III. Knowing God as Our Good Shepherd

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1. A Good Shepherd Seeks

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”
– Luke 19:10

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” – Luke 15:1-2

Note that word “gathering.”

The Pharisees are still the audience when Jesus goes on to tell the story of the Prodigal Son. When the prodigal son returns home after running away, spending the family fortune, the Father welcomes him with open arms. But the elder brother, the one out in the field, rails against the Father, scolding him for his mercy. He is alienated from his Father, even though he’s still at home.

So, Jesus, as he concludes this cluster of parables with the line of the Father to the Elder Brother: ³¹“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” – Luke 15:31-32

Jesus leaves the invitation to the “elder brother types”, to the Pharisees, open ended. There is no “conclusion” to the story – but it is asking the religious leaders, to come home as well.

To those elder-brother types, then and now, for those of us who can tend toward feeling self-righteous, he’s also saying, “Come home. Come back to the Father. Let my mercy melt your heart too.”

And when we do come all, to all of us, he calls us to share his attitude, and his ministry, of seeking out the lost ones too.

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Tim Keller makes a great point in his little book “The Prodigal God”: he says, “Jesus’ teaching consistently attracted the irreligious while offending the Bible-believing, religious people of his day.... If the preaching of our ministers and the practice of our parishioners do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, we must not be declaring the same message Jesus did.”

– Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God*

We want to share the radical graciousness of Jesus in such a way that those who are lost, and know it, they want to be here. If you’re a follower of Jesus, a Christian, then you are called to share his “seeking the lost” ministry too.

2. A Good Shepherd Provides

Listen to how David starts Psalm 23:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.”

So much of our fear arises out of a sense of scarcity: “If I don’t take this for myself, there won’t be enough to go around.” Enough resources. Enough love even.

But here’s this picture of rich generosity. Jesus says you can trust him. He teaches us to pray: “Give us today our daily bread.” Our good shepherd has more than enough for you.

3. A Good Shepherd Refreshes

Jesus puts it like this: “Come to me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” – Matthew 11:28a.
Rest from trying to prove myself.

Acts 3:19: “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

“Repent” doesn’t mean “feel bad about the things you’ve done wrong.” It might include legitimate sense of guilt – true. But it’s about the direction you are going. It’s about who’s leading you. Where are you going? Who is leading your life? Because someone is.

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Peter mentions the need for ‘repentance’ – for turning away from other allegiances, other leaders, other ‘lords’, other ways of being in the world, so that this King, your true leader, your Creator, your True King, would be your loving leader. That’s when you will know “times of refreshing” from the presence of the Lord.

4. A Good Shepherd Leads Us in Right Paths

David goes on: “he leads in me in right paths for his name’s sake.” Jesus says: “My sheep ‘know my voice’ and they follow me.” To “follow Jesus” is to take on the same way of life that he did. The same priorities. The same mission. The same ways of relating to God and others. Are you listening? Are you following?

5. A Good Shepherd Becomes My Shepherd

Listen again: “The Lord is my shepherd...” What a profound statement. In the mid-1800’s Charles Spurgeon wrote:

“There is no “if” nor “but”, nor even “I hope so:” but he says, “The Lord is my shepherd.”...The sweetest word of the whole is that monosyllable, “My.” He does not say, “The Lord is the shepherd of the world at large, and leadeth forth the multitude as his flock,” but “The Lord is my shepherd;” if he be a shepherd to no one else, he is a Shepherd to me; he cares for me, watches over me, and preserves me.”

– Charles Spurgeon, Treasuries of David Volume 1

Can you say the same today? Do you know that this is what God wants for you? This kind of closeness? To be *your* Shepherd?

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PERSONAL REFLECTION

Personal Reflection Questions

Read **Ezekiel 34:1-24**. Ezekiel is a strong word of judgement on Israel’s leaders at that time. Jesus’ words about being the “Good Shepherd” are likewise a strong warning against Israel’s leaders at *his time*.

1. How does it comfort you to remember that God cares about leadership – that leaders will give account for their actions?
2. What does that say to you about the leadership you’ve been given (we have to lead ourselves, and often, we also give leadership within our friend groups, our workplaces, our church community, even if it’s not recognized with a title)?
3. What does it mean to you to be able to call God *my Shepherd*? Take some time to list the ways. Take some time to respond in prayer.

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