

# The Shepherd

Good Friday

By Tony Buford

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**Bible Text:** Mark 15:16-47; Isaiah 53  
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**CrossPointe Community Church**  
4803 N. St. Joseph Ave.  
St. Joseph, MO 64505

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Let's pray.

*Our blessed Father, we thank you for the privilege of spending an evening thinking about the atonement of the blood of Christ, of the substitution that he gave willingly, happily, joyfully in order to bring to salvation poor, pitiful, undeserving sinners like we. We praise your name that this was planned before eternity; before the first human ever took a breath, you had decreed that the Savior should die. We thank you that you looked upon him and counted his righteousness as our own, his guilt-bearing as sufficient to take away our sin. And we thank you that we stand before you, those of us who have embraced him in his atoning work, that we can stand before you fully justified in your presence. So may we come soberly tonight because our sin cost him his life, and may we come joyfully because we have been liberated from our guilt, for it is in his name that we pray this. Amen.*

I want to read to you from Mark's Gospel this evening, Mark's account of the crucifixion from Mark 15. Our reading will begin in verse 16.

16 And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. 17 And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. 18 And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 19 And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. 20 And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him. 21 And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. 22 And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). 23 And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. 24 And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. 25 And it was the third hour when they crucified him. 26 And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." 27 And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and

one on his left. 28 29 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, 30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him. 33 And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. 34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 35 And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." 36 And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." 37 And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. 38 And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. 39 And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" 40 There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. 41 When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem. 42 And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 44 Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. 45 And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. 46 And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

This is God's holy and inspired word, and may tonight especially as we are thinking on these things, may he add his rich blessing to its reading this morning.

I want us to confess our sins together since it is those sins that cost our Savior his life, so would you join with me, please?

God is light. In him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

*Most holy and merciful Father, we confess to you and to one another that we have sinned against you by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength. We have not fully loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not always had in us the mind of Christ. You alone know how often we have grieved you by wasting your gifts, by wandering from your ways. Forgive us, we pray you, most merciful Father, and free us from our sin. Renew us the grace, the strength of your Holy Spirit for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son, our Savior. Amen.*

Let's stand together and sing.

You can be seated.

I want to read a couple of passages of Scripture to you this evening, one that I read every year at this time, and one that you will be intimately acquainted with from Isaiah 53, the famous Suffering Servant section of Isaiah.

1 Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? 9 And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. 10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. 11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

I also want to read to you probably the most famous passage of Scripture in the Old Testament. As I begin to read it, you will be able to say it along with me. It is, of course, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. 3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 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. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

A shepherd was bleeding to death, blood running in streams from multiple wounds. His chest heaved with every labored breath. His head ached from the trauma, his extremities tingled with numbness. He was dying and he knew it. Though his vision was beginning to blur, he could still make out a familiar face watching over him with an anguished expression that told him about the gravity of his injuries. He would not recover.

I imagine him thinking of his parents. As a young man, the shepherd had seen the sadness and loss that the parents bore on their faces, a look of regret that no amount of smiles or laughter could ever really mask. Like all children, he had a deep curiosity about their past together. He had asked them repeatedly to rehearse the story of their first meeting. He never tired of hearing how his father had awakened from a deep sleep to see this beautiful woman peering down at him, how in that moment he knew that she would be his wife; how he had first touched her face, gently caressed her hair; how those early days were filled with the uninterrupted bliss of first love. But he knew that there was more to the story. He could see its plot written in the deep lines of their faces. They still bore unusual beauty and he knew that as young people they must have been an extraordinarily attractive couple, but the beauty had been tarnished. Hands calloused. Strong backs bowed. Faces that were sagging under the weight of years. He wanted to know what had happened, why did they seem to bear such a heavy burden. He had often seen his father wander out by himself and look to the West, always to the West. What was out there? What had been taken from him that always seemed to draw him into a different time and place?

His brother was different. He was a man of the earth. He felt a kinship to soil and seed and yearly cycles of planting and harvest. He plowed and he sowed and he weeded until his produce appeared from the ground. He was fiercely proud of the food that he delivered to his family and they were proud of his work. But he was earthy in another way, he seemed to have little interest in the ways of the Creator and it showed in his life and in his worship. The shepherd knew that this was one of the reasons that their parents had grieved. They seemed to feel a responsibility for his behavior and that concern was etched deeply on their faces.

The brother was angry and it was a pattern with him, a seething, boiling rage that sat just beneath the surface ready at any moment to erupt, and now it had. The brothers had argued and the argument in a moment turned. All that pent up anger burst out in a torrent of bloody, murderous violence and now the shepherd lay dying on the ground, looking up through swollen eyes at the panic-stricken face of his brother. This is what humanity had come to. This is the grief borne on their parents' face. Brother against brother. And as the blood of Abel saturated the ground beneath him, it began to speak. It began to testify against Cain, his brother. It began to cry out for retribution, for vengeance, for justice.

The old shepherd looked down from the mountain on which he was standing toward the distant horizon. Many years ago he had entered this land as a foreigner because of a promise that he had received. It had come to him unexpectedly; it pushed him to leave behind all that was familiar, to venture out to a land that he had never seen. Maybe it started with a dream in which he saw himself leaving his own and wandering out to the edge of town, going up to a hill and looking off toward the West and wondering what lands lay beyond the fertile valley of his city. Maybe the dream kept repeating night after night until he knew that there was some great significance in it, and then one day in the middle of the day, it was no dream, he heard a voice. At first it was quiet and he looked around to see who was calling to him, but there was no one there. But the voice continued, "Abram. Abram." In time, he would come to recognize that voice, the voice of the one true God, the God who would take a childless man and make him the father of a nation.

So Abraham had left his home with his family and servants and flock in tow. It was not an easy journey. He stops on the way but finally he arrives in Canaan. He was 75 years old, a nomadic shepherd with a wife and a nephew and plenty of servants, but no son. For 25 years he waited for the promised child. In the meantime, he grew prosperous. He wandered all over the land to which God had brought him and the land that he had promised him, always an alien, always a stranger. Abraham saw with the eyes of faith what the Lord had planned for his descendants. He welcomed those designs in faithful patience but still, his heart longed for a son. Then 24 years after he had come to Canaan, he heard that voice again. This time, the Lord came to him in human form and as he sat in Abraham's tent, he told him that in 12 months he would return and Abraham and Sarah would have their son. What the Lord promises, the Lord fulfills, and the childless pain of those old parents would turn to laughter, so much so that they would name their son Yitzach, Isaac, laughter.

The long years of promise had now become the joyful years of fulfillment. Isaac was everything that they had hoped for; the cherished treasure of a couple who knew what it was like to be barren and now experienced what it was like to love and be loved by an adoring child. Whatever sizable treasure Abraham and Sarah had been able to accumulate, and it was sizable, none of their possessions could compare to this boy. But one day, that voice spoke again and it was a message that laid over Abraham's heart like a cold blanket. "Abraham. Abraham, take your son, your only son, the son whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." Most people upon hearing those words would think

that God was playing some awful, dark joke on them. "Surely you are not serious, Lord. A child sacrifice? That's the kind of thing demanded by the pagan gods of the Canaanites, not you, Lord! You're not like them! Come on, what's the punchline? What's the rest of the joke?" But that's not how Abraham responds. The text says very simply that Abraham gathers up his son, a couple of servants and a donkey, and he makes a three day journey toward Mount Moriah. It must have been the longest three days of his life.

And that's why the old shepherd stands with his son on this mountain. He has wood and kindling and an altar and, yes, he has a sacrifice. All that's left to do is the bloody deed. He takes his son and sadly binds him and then gently places him on top of the altar. He reaches his hand to grab a knife. It's his plan to slit the throat of his son to allow him to bleed to death and then to light the fire and burn the body of this boy. You can imagine that his heart is racing, his hand is trembling. His mind must be flashing with visions of all of these joyful memories that he has known since the birth of this son, but he must obey. And then he hears that voice, "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And behind the altar, a ram was stuck in a thorn patch. God, that voice, had provided his own sacrifice, a substitute for Isaac.

The shepherd's staff rested in the hands of the old man. It was reminiscent of another staff that he had held in his hands many years ago in a different place at a very different time in his life. The staff was wooden, that staff was golden. This staff marked him as a common shepherd, that staff had marked him as a prince. He was once surrounded by servants prepared to do his every bidding. He was wealthy, he was powerful, he was the cherished son of a queen. He lived in a palace. Now he lives in a tent. In a massive reversal of fortune, he has become a poor servant living the life of a nomadic shepherd. He didn't even own the sheep that he tended; they belonged to his father-in-law.

He was in Midian because he was a wanted man in Egypt. Though he had been reared as an Egyptian, he was, in fact, a Hebrew, the adopted son of an Egyptian princess, and one day he had sided with a Hebrew man in a dispute and had killed an Egyptian and that meant he had to leave. And now four decades later, he has lived in the obscurity of the Midian desert. Unknown to Moses at the time, his 40 years in the desert of Midian was an apprenticeship. He was being schooled in the fine art of shepherding. He was learning what it meant to lead and protect and be patient with stubborn, foolish sheep, for the Lord was preparing him to exchange the flock of Jethro for the flock of Yahweh, and he would spend the next 40 years doing just that.

It started with that voice, the same one that had called to Cain and said, "Where is your brother?" And it asked Abraham to leave all that was familiar, to journey to a foreign land. That voice now speaks to Moses from a bush that burns but is not consumed, "Moses! Moses!" You see, the Lord had heard the cries of his anguished children in Egypt. The descendants of Abraham are living outside the Promised Land as slaves in Egypt and Moses will be the shepherd to lead them home, and the staff that he has in his hand will be the agent of judgment to the oppressors and salvation to the Hebrews. He will throw it on the ground and it will become a serpent, devouring the serpents of Egypt.

He will strike the Nile with it and the river will turn to blood. He will lift his staff over the land and locusts devour all of the crops. And then as the flock of God is hemmed in against the Red Sea, he will lift that staff and the waters will part and the people of God, the flock of God, will be protected. Later in the wilderness, he would take that staff and he would strike a rock and water would flow out to nourish the parched mouths of those people.

Forty years will pass and the old shepherd will stand on the mountain looking over the Jordan River Valley to the verdant pastures of the Promised Land. He had faithfully cared for Yahweh's flock. He had brought them safely home and he died knowing that they would yet again dwell in green pastures.

The shepherd, still alone in the valley, an unlikely warrior facing an imposing foe. He looked like someone who spent his life tending sheep; he certainly didn't look like someone who was prepared to fight a Philistine warrior. In a cosmic battle that pitted God's covenant people against the forces of evil, David is the chosen one to bring victory to Israel. The destiny of the nation rests upon his shoulders. His victory is theirs. His defeat will ensure their slavery.

In comparison to Goliath, David looks weak and vulnerable, like a smaller, younger brother or an aged, childless man, a poor Egyptian fugitive living anonymously on the outskirts of civilization. Goliath is outfitted from head to toe with protective armor. He has a giant shield and a deadly spear. His sword is renowned for its size. Why, he even has his own personal armor-bearer to go with him. David looks like the shepherd that he is. He has five stones and a sling. He doesn't have the traditional weapons of spear or sword. It's a deadly mismatch. By all appearances, the fight will be over 10 seconds into the first round; a fatal blow will end this lightweight's life and Israel will be slaves once again. And it is a mismatch, but not in the way that Vegas oddsmakers think, because this young man knows what it's like to fight to protect those who are in his care. Bears, lions and Philistines, oh my! It doesn't matter. David fights in the name of the Lord and Yahweh will save his people by the hand of this shepherd king. He will rise to the battle. He will single-handedly rescue Israel. He will defeat his foes, spoil his house, and rise to the throne.

On Good Friday, the Good Shepherd died. The cherished Son of the Father, offered up by that Father, for his people, and the God who rescued Isaac from certain death provides no substitute for his own Son. At the moment when it appeared that there would be a ram stuck in the thicket, the crowd says, "Give us Barabbas!" and no substitute arises and he dies. The God who has spared the son of Abraham will not spare his own Son but delivers him up for us all. The Lord who delivered Moses from Pharaoh and David from Goliath, delivers Jesus into the hands of the Romans to be executed.

On Good Friday, the Good Shepherd gives his life for his sheep to bring them safely out of the wilderness, across the Jordan, and into the verdant pastures of the Promised land. He takes us West to the eastern entrance of Paradise to save the humanity lost in the Fall, the children of Adam restored to their rightful place; past the guardian angel whose

flaming sword has now been extinguished; into a tree of life and a river of life, to pleasant pastures and still waters where he restores our soul. And there in that place, he sets a table before his enemies and he anoints our head with oil and our cup overflows, and surely in that place, goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. No regrets. No weariness. Pilgrims that have finally been led home by their Great Shepherd.

On Good Friday, the Good Shepherd dies and as his blood runs like a stream to the ground, it speaks a better word than the blood of Abel because it cries out for mercy.

*Dear Father, we thank you that you did not spare your Son but delivered him up for us all. We thank you that that Great Shepherd King has secured the salvation of the children to whom you have given him. We thank you that he has faced the strongman and spoiled his house and he has risen to his throne, and now we wait for him to lead us out of this wilderness into the pleasant pastures of that Promised Land, back to the eastern entrance of that garden where we will dwell with you forever. On this night, we thank you that the Good Shepherd was also the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, for it is in his name that we pray this and honor him for it. Amen.*

*Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.*