

## “The Good Shepherd”

How many of you have ever managed a sheep farm? Ever owned sheep? Ever met a real live shepherd? How about this: How many have ever seen a sheep! Ever felt “sheepish”? Most of us don’t know a whole lot about sheep; probably even less about shepherds. Yet, the imagery of sheep and shepherds is woven into the language and stories of the Bible.

One of the great claims of Jesus is, “I am the good shepherd...” (John 10:11). If we can understand a bit more about sheep, and shepherds, we can catch more of the power and promise of Jesus’ words! I found a little book called *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, by Philip Keller, to be helpful in my understanding of sheep and shepherds.

Sheep are rather vulnerable and defenseless – they can’t protect themselves like most other animals. They tend to be rather fearful and timid. Sometimes stubborn and stupid. Sheep are dominated by a herd instinct: they follow each other with a kind of mass mind, even following one another into dangerous situations. Also, they can’t see very well. They have no sense of direction. Nibbling along, they might nibble themselves lost, or right over a cliff.

Shepherds, on other hand, were real folk heroes! Our image of shepherds may be children dressed in bathrobes in a Sunday School Christmas program, but shepherds were tough and courageous. They would ward off wolves or lions with a club, or engage in hand to hand combat with thieves. A little side note here. I saw shepherds when I took a trip to the Holy Lands. These modern day shepherds were doing much what they did in Old Testament and New Testament times – other than they would come up to our tour bus, let us take their picture, and hope we would give them money!

Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd...” (John 10:11). Notice, He says, “I am the *good* shepherd.” He contrasts Himself with those are *sheep stealers*, or “*hirelings*” (those for whom tending to the sheep was just a job, and who didn’t really care for the sheep). The background of Jesus’ words in John 10 probably was Ezekiel, chapter 34, where the prophet Ezekiel says the corrupt leaders of Israel were *false* shepherds. God was going to get rid of them, and seek out the lost sheep Himself. He would set a *good* shepherd over them.

***As the good shepherd, Jesus comes to give us life – life abundant and full!*** “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I am come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). How does He do this? What does Jesus do to offer us abundant living?

***He provides safety.*** For a long time I just assumed that if you let sheep graze, they would take care of themselves. They would be safe and secure. Well, that may be true of sheep farms in Lancaster County, but it wasn’t true in Palestine! As sheep kept on the move to find adequate pasture, they faced all kinds of dangers: rampaging rivers and streams in flood season, predators like lions or wolves, rock slides, thunderstorms and lightning, cold and snow that could mean exposure and death, sheep stealers, poisonous plants, ticks and parasites, steep cliffs, thorn bushes which could trap the sheep. A shepherd constantly had to monitor the sheep when they were out in the open to protect them

As human beings, we face “many dangers, toils and snares” too, don’t we (as a verse in the song Amazing Grace puts it). You know the list: illnesses, accidents, injuries, job loss, money worries, failing in a relationship, death, etc. There are other kinds of dangers, toils and snares – not physical, but moral, and spiritual - things that can ruin our relationship with God and destroy us: materialism, the lure of unbridled sensuality, unbelief, self-focused and self-centered living.

*Jesus, as the good shepherd, provides safety for us.* This doesn’t mean that bad things will never happen to us, or to those we love. None of us is immune from the pitfalls and dangers that are part of living in a fallen world. But Christ can be with us *within these circumstances* to see us through! He can deliver us from the things we fear in life. And nothing *eternally* can harm us: Jesus promised, “I give them (my sheep) eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28).

In another beautiful way Jesus describes how He protects the flock. He says, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep... whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture” (John 10:7,9). Sheepfolds in the hills were stone walled-in areas, with an opening so the sheep could go in and out (but there was no door). When the sheep were in for the night, the shepherd would lay across the opening, so no sheep could go in or out except over his body. The shepherd was actually “the door” that kept the sheep safe inside.

Jesus, as the good shepherd, even laid down His life for us! “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep” (John 10:11). Someone familiar with modern Palestine wrote how on one occasion three Bedouin robbers attacked a flock, and the shepherd, instead of fleeing, fought them, and was hacked to pieces, “and died among the sheep he was defending.” Jesus died to save us, to keep us safe for all eternity in family and presence of God.

But Jesus, our good shepherd, also *leads us*. He provides direction for our lives. “The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice” (vs. 3-5). Stories are told of how flocks can be mixed together, but when the shepherd calls, his sheep separate and follow. But if a stranger calls the flock, they actually become afraid and head off the other way.

*Jesus wants to guide and direct our lives.* In the beloved Psalm 23 it begins, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”, but then goes on to say of the shepherd, “He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Or, it could read, “He leads me in right paths.”

There are many “voices” we can listen to in life telling us how to live, telling us what’s right and what’s wrong: the voice of the crowd (popular opinion), voices of pop stars and Hollywood icons, voices of people without morals, or the voices of well-meaning people who just aren’t very wise. So, how can we hear the voice of the good shepherd? We have His words in Scripture – the New Testament. We can listen for Him in quiet moments of prayer and meditation. We can sometimes hear His voice as He speaks through wise and godly people. It’s worth the time and

to listen for the voice of the shepherd because He longs to lead us in right paths of living!

The good shepherd gives to his own *safety* and *direction*, and He also *provides us nourishment*. Verse 9 (again) says, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. *They will come in and go out and find pasture.*”

One of primary responsibilities of shepherd is to find suitable pastures so sheep can be fed. Phillip Keller, in his book on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, says what hard work it was to keep sheep grazing in proper places, to weed out poisonous plants, and to make sure the sheep didn't stay too long in one area, and eat the grass right down to the root.

Jesus feeds His sheep; He nourishes us in the deepest sense. We Americans have a lot compared to most people in the world, but still many of us are *empty inside*. We lack meaning, purpose, a deeper satisfaction in life.

There are a lot of things that will satisfy us... *for a while*. The new car... the new outfit... the latest home improvement... the TV program we hate to miss... the latest fad or trend. Anyone remember Tiny Tim? He was a celebrity back in the '60's era. Long, kinky hair. He played a ukulele while he sang “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” in a high-pitched falsetto voice. I was in my 20's then, and I once talked to a young lady, a bit younger than me, about Tiny Tim. She told me Tiny Tim was making an important, profound statement about life. I thought, “Gee, am I missing something here?” Well today, Tiny Tim is all but forgotten. Looking back, it all looks kind of silly. It's wise, before we jump on the bandwagon of the latest craze or fad, to ask, “How will this look 25 years from now?”

Who can satisfy deepest longing of human soul for meaning and purpose? The same Jesus who said, “I am the good shepherd” also said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35). When we follow the good shepherd, He leads us to pastures which are green and fertile. He feeds the deepest longings of our human spirit for joy and meaning with bread that satisfies.

One more thing about Jesus, the good shepherd: ***He cares for us – by name.*** “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:14). “He (the shepherd) calls his own sheep by name...” (John 10:3).

Sheep in Palestine were primarily kept for their *wool*. So, they were often with the same shepherd for years. A special bond would develop between each sheep and its shepherd. One person tells of how sheep, as they start out in the morning to graze, each takes a definite place in line and holds that position all during the day. But sometime during each day a sheep would leave its place in line and trot over to the shepherd. The shepherd would gently rub its nose and ears, and perhaps whisper in an ear of the sheep reassuringly. Then the sheep would take its place in line again.

Isn't that a beautiful image of how Jesus cares for us? It's easy in today's world to just feel like

a number, to feel lost in the shuffle of a highly technical, fast paced world. It's easy to feel forgotten, unimportant, unloved.

Think of some of the things we do to try to get people to notice us, accept us, like us? People do *silly* things to get attention, *sad* things to be noticed, *self-destructive* things to be loved and accepted. It's good to remember that some of the people we might disdain or condemn are just acting out of an inner need to *be cared for* as someone valued and special.

When we are willing to follow and trust Jesus as our shepherd and Savior, we can experience what it is to be loved and cared for – in the deepest sense - *by God!* Jesus, the good shepherd, says, “Jim...you are valued, you belong to Me.” “Sally...I know what you're going through, and we can make it together.” “Rich...I know you strayed from the right path in life, but I forgive you.” “Nicole...you're special...and I've got great things in store for you.” A father, who tended to be overly demanding and pretty much insensitive to the real needs of his teenaged son, yelled at the boy to sit down. The son said no. The father yelled louder and more angrily: “Sit down! Again, his son said “No!”. Finally, the boy said, “All right, I'll sit down, but *inside* I'm standing up!”

When we know the good shepherd, who cares for us and calls us by name, we can always be standing up inside! And we never have to feel worthless or put down again!

Jesus wants *every person – everyone* -to experience the ***protection*** and ***guidance*** and ***nourishment*** and ***care and affirmation*** He provides as our shepherd. How do I know He wants this for *everyone*? Because He said so. “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, shepherd” (John 10:16).

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*May 3, 2020*

