

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

A famous actor was once the guest of honor at a social gathering where he received many requests to recite favorite excerpts from various literary works. An old preacher who happened to be there asked the actor to recite the twenty-third Psalm. The actor agreed on the condition that the preacher would also recite it. The actor's recitation was beautifully intoned with great dramatic emphasis for which he received lengthy applause. The preacher's voice was rough and broken from many years of preaching, and his diction was anything but polished. But when he finished there was not a dry eye in the room. When someone asked the actor what made the difference, he replied "I know the psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."—author unknown

Do you know the Shepherd? It amazes me how many commentaries say that Jesus portrayed Himself as a shepherd because that's what the people in the agrarian society of the time knew and understood. I don't think that's the real story. From the earliest days of man's interaction with God until the end of time as we know it, the interaction of our Lord with us has been characteristic of a Good Shepherd. Sure, David was a shepherd as a youth and he wrote Psalms that reflected that in his praise and worship. Moses was a shepherd as well. But I don't buy for a moment the notion that God is simply playing a make-shift picture game when He talks about us as sheep and Himself as a shepherd. In fact, I would be much more inclined to believe that He intentionally fore-ordained and created the role of shepherding, good

shepherding, to help us know Him better.

In any event, let's consider our Shepherd, Jesus. As we do, may God's Spirit open our hearts to lessons and reminders that challenge, comfort and compel us onward, following Him to 'higher ground', in fact, the highest.

First, we must understand that the words Pastor and Shepherd are synonymous. Pastors can of course be teachers of the Word, knee-deep in church administration, 24/7 counselors and worship leaders, etc.

A recent survey resulted in the attributes of the perfect pastor. Here are the results. A perfect pastor:

- Preaches his sermons in exactly 12 minutes
- Frequently condemns sin but never upsets anyone
- Works from 8:00 a.m. until midnight
- Serves as the church janitor and lawn keeper
- Makes \$100 per week, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a nice car, and gives \$50 per week to the church.
- Is 28 years of age, and he's been preaching for 30 years
- Is wonderfully gentle and handsome
- Gives of himself completely but never gets too close to anyone lest he be criticized
- Speaks boldly on social issues, but must never become politically involved
- Has a burning desire to work with teenagers, and spends all his time with senior citizens
- Makes 15 calls daily to visit church members, visits the shut-ins and those in the hospital, spends all his time evangelizing the unchurched, and is always in his office when needed
- Prepares three or four inspiring lessons weekly from his lengthy hours in the study.

But, contrary to our expectation, first and foremost, the Word of God does

link the ministry of pastoring to that of being a shepherd – one who like the Good Shepherd, Jesus, cares for the sheep. Christ said, *"I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep."* (Jn 10:11)

"The faithful pastor will, as an under-shepherd, display the same characteristics as the Good Shepherd. He will sacrifice for the sheep... He will be a shepherd and not a hireling who does not care about the sheep. The title pastor translates the same ancient Greek word used...for shepherd. It is a title that is only rightfully earned, not granted or assumed." – Guzik

According to Jewish religious law, [shepherds] were unclean. Their line of work prevented them from participating in the feasts and holy days that made up the Jewish religious calendar. Why? Well, somebody had to watch the sheep. When everyone else was making the trip to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the temple, or to participate in one of the annual feasts, they were out in the fields, watching over the sheep. A modern day example might be a trucker or a shift worker, whose job keeps them from regularly attending church. It wasn't really their fault. But they were looked down on, from a religious point of view. Whatever might have been in their hearts, they weren't able to participate fully in the religious life of the community.

Not only that, but shepherds were borderline social outcasts. Since they were constantly on the move to find new pasture for their flocks, they were looked on with suspicion. Kind of the way people today might look at gypsies, or carnival workers. They were often accused of being thieves. If something came up missing – it must have been those shepherds. They were not permitted to give

testimony in a legal proceeding, because their word wasn't considered trustworthy.... Most of the time, they were living out in the fields. This was not a 40-hour a week job. They didn't come home at night. They were with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During the day, they led the sheep to grass and water. They watched while the sheep grazed. They kept an eye out for predators like wolves. And at night, they actually slept in the sheep pen with the sheep to guard against theft and animal attack. A good shepherd could identify each one of his sheep by sight. – Alan Perkins

As you might expect, the world and worldly religionists abhor this role – oh, not the honored title but the 'job description'. In fact, this is typified clearly in the first mention of shepherds in the Bible. In the book of Genesis, when Jacob brings all his family to Egypt to escape the famine, Joseph, his son, arranges for them to live separately in the land of Goshen saying that they should make it clear to Pharaoh that they are keepers of livestock, *"...for every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians."* (Gen 46:34)

Now consider this in concert with the fact that Jesus Himself is referred to in scripture not only as a shepherd but as the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd and the Chief Shepherd. These adjectives can also be translated Beautiful, Mega-, and Original. Get the picture? Christ is the real deal, the original, the only and authentic standard as a shepherd. Is it any wonder Jesus said, *"If the world [Egypt] hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you."* (John 15:18)

So what kind of shepherd is He? First, He's the kind that goes before the flock – Num 27:17. Now, if you're

a 'gung-ho' kind of person, you may think He'll just be getting in your way. You would rather that He follow behind like a cowboy yippin' and yappin', driving you onward or on the sidelines like a cheerleader jumping and shouting, motivating you to win. In reality, whether aggressive or timid, most of us try to take the lead in our lives most of the day, most every day. Yet, He goes before us because He knows the way. He knows it all! If you really want Him in the background or on the sidelines, you don't yet know Him as your Shepherd.

Next, He's the kind of shepherd that provides for His flock – Psa 23:1. Of course, spiritual provision – feeding of the Word, comfort, encouragement, counsel, faith, hope and love, etc. are the most important provisions He gives, but this is inclusive of physical provision as well. The old KJV says, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." That does not mean He fulfills the lusts of our greedy little hearts. The word "want" means lack. In other words, the Good Shepherd will take care of your needs. And for many if not most of us, this is where the rub is – we think we know what our needs are. Yet, because we rarely if ever see the big picture of what God is doing in our lives, we can be misled in this. Usually, however, our desperation is simply God's preparation. Along with me, I'm sure you've discovered that He is faithful.

Next, He's the kind of shepherd who leads His flock to still waters – Psa 23:2. At first, this may not seem like such a big deal, but you should understand that sheep need still waters to drink. Typically, rushing waters are intimidating to them. Sure, rushing, gushing, bubbling rapids are pretty to look at, but it's the still waters from which the sheep will drink deeply. The Good Shepherd knows

His flock. He does not lead them to risky waters even if they look pretty or exciting. The Good Shepherd is discerning and loves His flock. Sheep don't swim.

Next, He's the kind of shepherd who makes the flock lie down in green pastures – Psa 23:2. He's not in a hurry. Many of us think of life as consisting of nothing more than a series of getting from points A to points B. Yet, these words are poetic in nature – this place of rest is where the grass is fresh, tender new sprouts – tasty, easy chewing. Also, the word pasture here comes from the word meaning comely or beautiful. So, of course, there are both spiritual and physical applications.

Sheep will not rest until they are free from hunger. A hungry sheep is always on its feet, searching for another mouth of food, trying to satisfy its gnawing hunger. In Israel, green pastures didn't just happen by chance. Shepherds had to search hard for green areas or cultivate them themselves. But when a sheep had eaten enough, when it was free from fear, tension and aggravation, it would lie down.

Next, He's the kind of shepherd who restores our souls – Psa 23:3. Now, restore means to return or bring back and the word used for soul here, according to Strong, means "soul, self, life, creature, person, appetite, mind, living being, desire, emotion, passion". This Shepherd doesn't give up on you when you're in the muck and mire of the world or when your character is filled with fault. His heart is bent on restoring you, the real you. Yes, there's an unreal you as well that's about to be discarded because it's temporal, carnal and corrupted by sin. It is dead in Christ while the real, eternal you is God's restoration project. It is the Good Shepherd's

good work. (See Phi 1:6 and Heb 13:21)

There is an Old English shepherd's term called a "cast" sheep. This is a sheep that has turned over on its back and can't get back up again. It happens frequently. And when it happens, all the sheep can do is lie on its back, with its feet flaying frantically in the air. Sometimes it will bleat, but usually it will just kick.

If the shepherd doesn't arrive within a short time, the sheep will die. That's one of the reasons why a shepherd is always looking over its flock, counting them to see if they are all on their feet. If one is missing, he thinks, "One of my sheep is cast and I've got to find it." This is the thought behind the parable of the 99 sheep and the one that went astray.

Many times a shepherd will search for hours for a single sheep, only to find it on its back, lying helpless. He will turn the sheep over on its side, rub its legs to restore circulation, then lift it to its feet. After a while the sheep will stumble and stagger, and then eventually walk steadily and surely.

That's probably what David had in mind when he said, "He restoreth my soul" because that's how our Lord treats us. We stumble and fall, we become so helpless. And yet our shepherd is patient and tender and helpful in getting us back on our feet. – Alan Smith

Next, He's the kind of Shepherd who leads the flock in paths of righteousness – Psa 23:3. Oh, how I love this about my Shepherd. The picture here is not one of the shepherd wading through some overgrown jungle with machete in hand, chopping away, clearing a barely negotiable opening through uncharted territory. Rather, the words speak clearly of a well worn pathway, one well traveled. Why is this?

Simply because He's been there many times before and many sheep like you have followed His footsteps securely. In similar fashion, Paul wrote, "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe." – Phi 3:1 Contrary to the conditioning of our culture, we would be better served to appreciate more what's right and true spiritually than what's bright and new.

Next, He's the kind of Shepherd who comforts, protects and disciplines the flock – Psa 23:4. In fact, His comfort comes specifically from His protection and discipline. You see, the Good Shepherd carries a rod and a staff. With the former, He smacks attackers; with the latter, He pulls me out of the predicaments I've stumbled into and even adjusts my course now and then with a merciful 'swat'. Now, you may think, 'protecting me from an enemy is certainly comforting but how does this disciplinary 'course correction' work? How is it comforting?'

Simply put, the Lord only disciplines His children (Heb 12:6-8). The very fact that He deals with you when you need it (and you know you need it now and then) assures you that He loves you too much to let you continue in that way you've taken. You can enjoy the comfort of knowing He sees you and treats you as His child.

Next, He's the kind of Shepherd who gathers the lambs in His arm and carries them in His bosom – Isa 40:11. Some shepherds minister very much 'at arm's length', but the Good Shepherd carries those who are young in the faith very close to His heart. Their burdens are His burdens. He knows their weakness and vulnerability. But, once they know His loving voice and strong affectionate arms, they'll not leave His side.

Next, He's the kind of Shepherd who gently leads those who are with young – Isa 40:11. He knows our limitations. As He leads us onward, we can rest assured that He knows our condition and has adjusted the pace. Spiritual progress for some of us simply has to come gently.

Next, He's the kind of Shepherd that searches out the lost – Luk 15:1-6. Invitations from the pulpit are beautiful, but the picture here is of the One who sets everything aside to go looking for His lost lamb. His utter dedication to each and every one in the flock is obvious.

From the time He called out to Adam and Eve in the Garden, "Where are you?" to His death on Calvary and even unto today, His mind has been dedicated to recovering all. Quite simply, He knows the pain of losing loved ones. How or why they ended up lost is never the main point with Him. As with the prodigal son, He wants us to learn from our errors, but no mistake, no sin is so grievous that His loving grace is insufficient. He knows the lost cannot find their way back into His arms on their own. And because each one means the whole universe to Him, He cannot settle for 99 out of 100. He searches them out.

But the most emphatic statements from Jesus about being a shepherd are found in John 10 and the most obvious conclusion we draw from studying them is that, above all, the shepherd knows his sheep. And his sheep know him. *"I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine."* (Jn 10:14)

At the risk of seeming simplistic, I believe that the great preponderance of problems in the church, both in the pulpit and the pew, are traceable to this fundamental issue. Knowing the sheep and knowing the Shepherd. There are many and quite plausible

excuses for shepherds not knowing the sheep, but if you're a shepherd and you don't, you're missing a fundamental point in the role. In imitating Christ, it is the principle point. On the other hand, knowing the Shepherd is requisite to being a part of His flock. You can know everything about Him and yet never know Him. To know Him is to love Him is to Know Him is to Love Him is to KNOW Him is to LOVE Him... Do you want to know Him more?

Jesus often leads us out of our comfort zone so He can reveal something to us about Himself. He tells us to launch out into the deep so He can reveal something to us about Himself (Luk 8:22-25). He takes us by the hand and leads us out of the city blind so He can reveal something to us about Himself (Mar 8:22-25). He calls us up into a high mountain apart so He can reveal something to us about Himself (Mat 17:1-8).

The problem is that most people won't follow Him up or out or over, because they don't really want to know Jesus. There is something interesting about the word "know" in Philippians 3:10. It is the Greek word "Ginosko" which is a Jewish idiom for the word "intercourse". The same way Adam knew Eve and Eve conceived -- it implies intimacy.

To know Jesus requires such intimacy where we want to do something for Him because He was willing to do something for us. Some people want to know the blessings, but they don't want to know Jesus. Some people want to know the power of His resurrection, but they don't want to experience His resurrection. For you see, experiencing His resurrection requires a dying process, dying to self. But there is no better Shepherd and no better fold than His.