

Today we bring to a close, our brief study of **"The Good Shepherd"**, and prepare for the season of Advent.

The Good Shepherd is a recurring and dominant theme right through Bible history. At the start of human history, we find two brothers, one was a shepherd who tended flock, the other a farmer, who worked the land, planting and harvesting. The brother who worked the land, was jealous of the brother who tended flock, assuming perhaps, the work of a shepherd was easier than the work of a farmer, that the shepherd sat around watching the sheep graze (like watching paint dry!), and the farmer bore the brunt of physical labour. So, consumed by jealous rage, the elder farmer-brother, killed his younger shepherd-brother. That's the story of Cain and Abel.¹

It is very likely that families in the lands of the Middle East who earned their income from shepherding and farming, adopted this custom, that the first son starts as a shepherd. When a second son arrived, the older son transferred his energies from sheep-raising to helping his father with plowing, sowing and harvesting, and the task of shepherding passed to the younger boy. This custom continued with every successive son.

Around 1000 BC, we see this custom practiced in the family of David. When Saul, the first king of Israel failed to honour God and sought the services of a witch, God tells the prophet Samuel to visit a man called Jesse, who paraded seven sons before Samuel. As each walked before him, God said, "No, that's not the one I have chosen". So Samuel asks Jesse, "Do you have any more sons?", to which Jesse replies, "There is the youngest, but he is out in the fields, **tending sheep.**"² When the

¹ Genesis 4

² 1 Samuel 16:11

youngest son, David is brought before Samuel, God says, "This is the boy who will be prince³ over my people. Anoint him."

David's life teaches us, the shepherd is a multi-talented professional, who must possess several skills. The shepherd must identify good grassland to graze his sheep, and locate trees with plenty of fresh green leaves, for the goats to feed on. Sheep will graze and rest in the shade, while goats are on a constant feeding frenzy.

The shepherd must know when to lead sheep to water; sheep must drink before the goats, because goats tend to step into water, and muddy it with their feet.

The shepherd should be aware when sheep wander away, and take all necessary steps to bring them back into the pasture; not one should ever be lost.

He must be aware if any in the flock becomes ill, or contracts a disease; they have to be separated before the flock is contaminated, and attended to quickly.

The shepherd must fend off wild animals who might think the shepherd was saving the sheep for them!

The work of the shepherd is very complex and requires a multi-talented person; far more than skill, however, the Good Shepherd is a person who is tender and compassionate, who cares for his sheep **with his life**.

As we studied the characteristics of a good shepherd, it became clear, God chose this motif, at least in part, because we His people, act like sheep. I did not make it up! The prophet Isaiah reminds us of the

³ 2 Samuel 5:2

connection between God's people and sheep, which is often negative.⁴ "Sheep are not only dependent creatures, they are singularly unintelligent, prone to wandering and unable to find their way back to the shepherd, even when he is in sight."⁵ The only way they come back to the Shepherd is by the sound of his voice.

The analogy is fitting, because of our helplessness and our tendency to wander, be distracted, and lost as a result, we are in need of a Good Shepherd.

On his deathbed, Jacob, a master shepherd himself, declared God had been his **"shepherd all of his life to this day."**⁶

David also captures this image. He says to God in prayer, **"So we Your people and the sheep of Your pasture will give thanks to You forever"**⁷ Later, David declares in open worship, **"For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand."**⁸

He would know! David was an excellent shepherd himself, but knew God as the Good and Perfect Shepherd

David has given us our favourite passage in the whole Bible, Psalm 23, which is a perfect and complete description of God, the Good Shepherd:

The Lord ... He lets ... He leads ... He gives ... He protects, He comforts ... He prepares and feeds ... He pours ... He fills to overflowing ... He pursues me with His goodness and love, until I make my home with Him in His house, forever!

⁴ e.g. Isaiah 53:6

⁵ Ryker, Leland. Dictionary of Biblical Imagery : Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill., 1998.

⁶ Genesis 48:15

⁷ Psalm 79:13

⁸ Psalm 95:7

Now, the idea of shepherd as leader is not exclusive to the Bible. Many cultures and religions offer images and ideas of shepherd-like leaders, leading their people.

There are, however, two characteristics which distinguish the shepherd of the Bible. First, God, not His prophets or followers, is the ultimate Good Shepherd, a concept not found in other cultures and religions. The God of the Bible, who by His very nature is selfless in tending and caring for His people, feeding, healing, guiding, protecting and all the things we talked about, sets the standard for the Good Shepherd.

The second characteristic is the most significant. This not only distinguishes, but sets apart the shepherd in the Bible, which is “rescue”. Not only does God provide, lead and take care of the sheep of His pasture, He goes after them **at the peril of His own life**, to bring them back safely into His home, where they belong.

The parable of the prodigal son and the two parables which precede it, describe God’s passionate intention to “rescue” and welcome home, those lost or gone astray: starting with the shepherd who leaves everything to find and bring back **ONE** lost sheep; the woman who will not rest until she has found the **ONE** lost coin; and the Father who goes out running to welcome the son he thought was lost, when he saw him as but a speck on the horizon, and who runs out of the party to plead with His elder son to join the celebration, because this your brother we thought was dead, is alive, was lost and now is found!⁹ God is singularly intent on rescue-and-welcome.

⁹ Luke 15:32

The theme of “**rescue**” runs across the history of the Bible. As we approach Christmas, please hold this image in your mind: God comes as His Son, to “**rescue**” us.

You may well say, why do we need to be rescued? From *whom* or *what* are we to be rescued?

Consider this: when He created us, God did not create us to live in a broken world; God created us for the perfect world He ordered into existence, to live in it and enjoy it.

We had at our disposal all the plants to eat, but there were two we were told, not to touch, because the fruit of the two trees were not ripe; the time was not yet, to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the fruit from the Tree of Eternal Life.

Giving in to the temptation to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil before its time, had its consequences. The perfect world, for which we were created had to be shut, to be opened at an appropriate time in the future, and we were ushered into the world where every action has a consequence, a broken world we are trying to fix with all the progress we make in medicine, agriculture, technology, housing, clothing, education and so on.

But God’s plan is not leave us to the consequences in this broken world, where death is prevalent everywhere, and the news from Paris, speaks to this fact: wars and battles, drugs, suicide, accidents, murders and so on. Not a single day passes when the morning and evening news does not carry at least one item of news about the death of a person, man, woman and child.

God the Good Shepherd, the Perfect Shepherd, has planned to rescue us from this broken world and restore us as His perfect creation, into His perfect world, for which we were created.

When trouble comes our way, we think "**the LORD has forsaken/ abandoned me**"¹⁰. But the Good Shepherd reminds us, "**I will never leave you, nor will I ever abandon you**"¹¹

He also gives us a glimpse of what is to come, "**the Lamb at the centre of the throne (*Jesus*) will shepherd them, will lead them to springs of living water, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.**"¹²

Take this teaching with you into Christmas this year: God the only Good Shepherd who cares for you with His life, is on a mission to rescue you from this broken world. Trust Him! His Son has come, and will come again! **AMEN**

¹⁰ Isaiah 49:14

¹¹ Hebrews 13:5

¹² Revelation 7:17