

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Today we'll be discussing Jesus in his role as the Good Shepherd, a perfect analogy and summation for Christ's work here on earth. This scripture establishes the authority, standing, purpose and power of Christ Jesus. He has shown us who He is, who His Father is, and his standing as the Savior of all the sheep in His care, and even those in the world who do not yet know Him. His power is such as to make his voice heard everywhere by everyone. We also see that He is able to unite all the different sheep from other areas into his sheepfold, bringing all of them together into his own pasture.

What do you think Jesus meant when he mentions 'other sheep?' In verse 16 Jesus was talking about only the Jews. But he meant that the other sheep, or the Gentiles, would also be included. So now we see that all men would then be offered a chance to become one of Christ's sheep. Even then, over 2000 years ago, Christ gave the whole world an opportunity to become a part of eternity.

What is the job of a shepherd? Do you know? Is it to let the sheep roam the hillsides, manage on their own to stay out of trouble, find enough to eat, and to run away if they sense danger? That is what some hired hands would do if they have no concern for their flock. You might think looking after sheep is a simple task, but it isn't. Looking after sheep is a highly specialized job. It takes a good shepherd years to learn his trade, and it is often passed on from father to son.

We all know that sheep aren't too smart. On a cold night, sheep will pile on top of one another to stay warm; the sheep at the bottom of the pile often suffocate. Unless prevented, a sheep will eat until it becomes bloated, falls over and dies. When a particular sheep man was transporting his cattle and horses, he said they always leaned in the proper direction when his truck went around a corner. In contrast, his sheep would often lean in the wrong direction, fell over and could not get back up. A frightened sheep will sometimes walk right off the edge of a cliff.

Some sheep mannerisms that can be attributed to some people are: we, as sheep, follow the crowd and don't stop to think of the consequences. This is so prevalent in our world today, following the newest fad or trend that comes along regardless of the problems that come along with it. Also, we, as sheep, can be pretty stubborn. For example, how many of us refuse to update or change some

of the things that we have done for years, even though there are much better ways to get the job done. When we as sheep trust someone, we will follow him/her without thinking. It is therefore essential that we follow our Good Shepherd, who will care for us, and not exploit us.

Another example in the Bible of a good shepherd was David, who also wrote the 23rd Psalm. Day and night, David was always guarding his flock. Daily he sought good, succulent green pastures so that the sheep had a proper and nourishing diet, and he also protected the sheep from all sorts of predators, and was ready to give up his life for them if that would have been necessary. David was a great example of just what a good shepherd should be. One who was brave and faithful enough to face all odds just to save his flock from harm. He loved the sheep, cared for them, protected them, and would never leave them alone. But Christ, as our shepherd leader, does all of that and more. Jesus willingly laid down his life on the cross for his flock, all humanity, so that they might be taken care of eternally.

In the parable of the lost sheep, we are told a shepherd had 100 sheep and found that one of them was missing. What do you think he did? Did he say that one sheep was of no consequence and he would concentrate on the 99 that were left? No! He left the flock of 99 safely grazing and went out to search for the one that was lost. And we read that when he found it he came home rejoicing!

That shepherd is a good shepherd protecting all his sheep and wants only the very best for them. That shepherd is Christ Jesus.

Psalm 23 gives us a wonderful example of just what a good shepherd should be. Most of us know it by heart so let's recite it now...

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters,

He restoreth my soul.

He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

For thou art with me.

Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou prepareth a table before me in the presence of mine enemies,

Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen

How comforting and reassuring that psalm is. Words that we can say over and over that always make us give thanks for the loving care of our Father in heaven. Words to calm our troubled souls when we are tried by the world's problems. Words to give us hope that after our earthly death, we will be united with Father and Son forever.

One day, two men were called on, in a large classroom, to recite the 23rd Psalm. One was a published orator trained in speech technique and drama. He repeated the psalm in a powerful way. When he finished, the audience cheered and even asked for an encore so that they could hear his wonderful voice again. Then the other man, who was much older, repeated the same words--"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want"...But when he was finished, no sound came from the large class. Instead, people sat in a deep mood of devotion and prayer. Then the first man, the orator, stood to his feet. "I have a confession to make," he said. "The difference between what you have just heard from my old friend, and what you heard from me is this: I know the psalm, my friend knows the Shepherd."

How comforting it is to know that we have such a wonderful shepherd that leads us to places of rest while we pray, where we can be restored from worldly cares and pressures we face daily. There we can rest in the Lord and get sustenance, both the spiritual communion and physical peace that we need.

We read that Christ often escaped from the crowds, which surrounded him constantly, to be with and pray to His Father. He also needed to find respite from the daily chaos of His life, within the cool, still waters of prayer and meditation to find refreshment and nourishment from His Father in heaven.

Christ, as our shepherd, protects us from the harm we find in our world today. But even though hurtful things occur in our lives, we need not fear, for he is always there to protect and ease whatever we may come across. He shows us the way, even through the valley of the shadow of death, and leads us through

safely to the other side. He leads us on the right and correct paths, all we have to do is call upon His name.

The Good Shepherd anoints us with his Holy Spirit so when we face our earthly trials and tribulations, those of illness or financial issues to name a few, or even if we stray off the path of righteousness, He will never abandon us. We know that his goodness and mercy will follow us for all the days of our lives. And we have that glorious promise that when our lives are over, we will forever be living in the presence of our wonderful loving God.

In the gospel reading today, we saw the bond that exists between the shepherd and his sheep. They all know Him and will not follow another. The individual sheep in a flock all look the same to the untrained eye. A good shepherd, however, can tell them apart by smallest of things, like one might have a patch of wool off its back, or another has a black mark over its right eye, or another a small tear out of its left ear. There also may be several flocks sharing the same sheepfold. However, when the shepherd of the sheep walks up to the gate and calls his sheep, they instantly recognize his voice and respond to him. Do we listen and respond so quickly to our Master's voice when he speaks to us?

Of the many images painted by John in his wonderful gospel, probably the most descriptive image is that of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In these verses, we can see the very heart of Jesus. He knows us, his sheep...He knows everything about us. He knows every strength and weakness, every joy and every burden in our life. He knows every mountain and every valley we walk over. He knows every victory and every battle we face. And He cares for us so deeply that He gave his life for us...

Do you know this Good Shepherd? Have you recognized His voice calling you by name?

Not only does God desire all of us in this sanctuary today to know the Good Shepherd, but He also wants everyone outside of these walls, and outside of this pasture to know Him as well. So here we are...And the question needs to be asked: What are we doing as a church to bring outsiders into our fold? Will we invite them in? Or will we find ourselves like frightened sheep without direction, not knowing where to go or who to follow, ignoring those who need to be rescued as we were once rescued. Are we following our Masters voice? Are we offering hope to outsiders? Is the gate wide open for those lost ones to enter our

sheepfold freely? The answer to this question is up to us.

Jesus Christ promises to be our shepherd both inside the sheepfold and when we are out in the wilderness. May we all continue to follow and obey Him, listen for His voice, and remain secure and safe within His love wherever we may be.

Amen