

Characteristics of the Great Shepherd The Living Shepherd

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

The Living Shepherd

Today we start a new series entitled “The Great Shepherd” in which we will consider how the Lord Jesus cares for His people as a shepherd does for his flock. Our heading today is “The Living Shepherd”, considering the Lord Jesus in His shepherd-life on earth, and how that work continues in heaven for us even today.

Rural Idylls and Harsh Realities

Perhaps we have a romanticised view of shepherding. Certainly, in England still today we can find pastoral landscapes replete with peaceful grazing sheep, and children’s books provide idealised stories of the lives of shepherds from the past. [My own family ancestry research only identifies workers in industry and coal mines, so I have no personal stories from rural life to draw from.](#) However, my family by marriage had one great-great-grandfather who was a shepherd out in the hills of Northumberland. [This required living a remote, hard, and solitary life out in the country, away from frequent human interaction.](#) As family history records, after some years this shepherd gave up his shepherding of sheep due to his desire that his new and growing family should be able to have regular Christian fellowship and instruction in their early years – and so he left the hills behind and came down to alternative employment in a local small town. Handing on the baton of herding the sheep in his care to another, he instead directed his ‘shepherd heart’ towards his own children, and all seven of them were soundly converted to Christ at a young age and went on to bring up their own families for Christ. A great practical example indeed of a shepherd-heart!

As we begin considering Christ as our shepherd, we may turn to the early chapters of the Bible and find out what is said in the first instance about shepherds. [This is often a very illuminating way of starting Bible study – where do we get a first mention of a subject or an idea?](#) And if we romanticise the role of a shepherd, in practice many of us might shy away from any idea of doing the hard and sometimes dirty work required. Resolving the sicknesses and infections of a herd of unbidable sheep does not feel like living in such a rural idyll after all! And, interestingly, as we turn to the first book of the Bible, we find something of this idea in the first mention of shepherding. [Being a shepherd was not an elevated role in high society, and we get some sense of the social contagion that may have afflicted those who had to be the ones to do that hard, dirty, and difficult work.](#)

If you know the history of Joseph and his exile – sold into Egypt as a slave by his brothers, who hated him – you will know that after a great many years, his brothers and father are re-introduced to him in very straitened circumstances once Joseph has been elevated to a type of ‘Prime Minister’ role over Egypt. Only the King, known as the Pharaoh, is higher than Joseph in the kingdom. And as the story unfolds, Joseph is now ready to introduce his brothers and father to the King, but there is a significant problem in Joseph’s mind – the huge divide between the Egyptians

on the one hand, and the regular workers from the land of Canaan such as Joseph's family on the other. For we read in Genesis 43:32:

“The Egyptians could not eat food with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.”

At least part of the reason for this loathing that the Egyptians had for Joseph's family, we discover, arose from the brothers' occupation – they were shepherds. And so Joseph prepares his brothers, instructing them in the careful way they are to introduce themselves to Pharaoh in court, and also explaining to them the reason why:

“So it shall be, when Pharaoh calls you and says, ‘What is your occupation?’ that you shall say, ‘Your servants’ occupation has been with livestock from our youth even till now, both we and also our fathers,’ that you may dwell in the land of Goshen: for every **shepherd** is an **abomination** to the Egyptians” (Genesis 46:33-34, my emphasis).

Joseph gives his brothers a form of words to use before the King that avoids the explicit use of the word ‘shepherd’ from their resumés, knowing that ‘every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians.’ In doing so he is hoping to moderate any adverse reaction by Pharaoh's court to these ‘abominable’ shepherding Hebrews as they are brought before Pharaoh.

We should not be surprised by this attitude – history often repeats itself, and even today we see nations, including our own, importing labour from other parts of the world to do the tasks that are either seen as economically unviable or socially beneath us. And so, no doubt the Egyptians sought help from the land of Canaan for labourers to look after the herds – but they still maintained their social distance.

Interestingly though, the brothers answer directly when they are asked by Pharaoh, ‘What is your occupation?’ They do not shrink back from identifying themselves with this supposedly menial work. “Your servants are shepherds, both we and also our fathers”, they reply (Genesis 47:3). So, you may ask why I have laboured this introductory point at the start of our series on Christ as the Great Shepherd? Well, I think it is worth reminding ourselves that from its earliest mention in Scripture, the role of a shepherd was not as viewed by the world at large as a quietly dignified role, celebrated in polite society, but rather as being something beneath the notice of such ‘civilised’ society. (Perhaps you can see where we are heading with this thought of the despised shepherd?)

Israel Elevates Their Shepherds

Joseph's brothers acknowledged their supposedly lowly status before Pharaoh, and perhaps this begins to lay the groundwork for the nation of Israel attaching a dignity and honour to the role that had not elsewhere been recognised. It is therefore striking that we see the nation of Israel taking on and celebrating the role of shepherd as a leadership role – something seemingly repugnant to outsiders. As we learn in Scripture, this is not surprising in God's ways – “For the LORD does not see as man sees” (1 Samuel 16:7) – and so when Joseph's father, Jacob, prophesies about his sons, he notes that, “By the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob (from there [that is, from Jacob] is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel)” (Genesis 49:24b). The rejected and diminished shepherd-nation is to look for a future Shepherd who will arise from their descendants – and then, that Shepherd will be exalted to a high position.

And so, this exalting of the shepherd to a defining leadership characteristic becomes an essential feature in the nation's outlook. We see this in many examples as time passes. Moses' shepherd leadership is identified, in retrospect, in leading the escape from Egypt across the Red Sea, as Isaiah writes, “Where is He who brought them up out of the sea, with the shepherd of His flock?” (Isaiah 63:11). Similarly Moses, when preparing to hand on the reins of leadership to Joshua,

explains it is so ‘...that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep which have no shepherd’ (Numbers 27:17). Later, between the time of Joshua and the kings, the judges of Israel were ‘...commanded to shepherd My people.’ (1 Chronicles 17:6).

Probably the greatest example of the shepherd-king in Israel’s history is illustrated by Asaph’s reflection on the LORD’s choice of David to be King. Asaph writes in Psalm 78:

“He also chose David His servant, and took him from the sheepfolds;
from following the ewes that had young He brought him, to shepherd
Jacob His people, and Israel His inheritance” (Psalm 78:70-71).

And so, David, who had grown from the lowly position of shepherd himself into the position of the first King of Israel of God’s own choosing, was able to draw upon his own experiences as a shepherd to act in the same character for his people.

Many Failing Shepherds, But One Good Shepherd

But so very importantly, David switches the viewpoint in his famous Psalm (Psalm 23) – perhaps reflecting on what, by this time, was Jacob’s ancient prophecy of a future Shepherd. The shepherd-king reverses the relationship and says, with experience of a long life of living under the Lord’s hand and guidance, ‘The LORD is **my** Shepherd’ (Psalm 23:1, emphasis mine). He identifies God Himself as the one who has taken on the mantle of the shepherd, a role presented to us from earliest times as being despised by the world at large.

Similarly, as the age of the kings of Israel draws to a close, the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel take up this depiction of the God of Israel as a shepherd – but now, not merely as one who shepherds from a heavenly throne, but one who will come in person to take up the role. As Isaiah writes:

“Behold, the LORD God shall come with a strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young” (Isaiah 40:10-11).

Similarly, Ezekiel laments the dreadful performance of Israel’s so-called shepherd-leaders and looks to God Himself as the true answer:

“For thus says the Lord God: “Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down,” says the LORD GOD. “I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment”” (Ezekiel 34:11-16).

Our final prophecy in the Old Testament regarding the future Shepherd which we will consider is given by Zechariah. It may have been somewhat enigmatic to the people of the time, as this

prophecy identifies the Shepherd as one who is a 'Companion' of the Lord, and perhaps astonishingly to the hearers, He is to be struck down, resulting in a scattering of the sheep.

"Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, against the Man who is My Companion," says the LORD of hosts. "Strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered" (Zechariah 13:7).

This prophecy could not be fully understood at the time of its telling, though we will now turn to see how it can be fulfilled in Christ. So let us consider Christ as our Shepherd, and His appearance into the world as recounted in the New Testament.

The Living Shepherd Is Introduced

As we move towards the birth of Jesus, we see a nation that has embraced the despised role of a shepherd and has not only elevated the shepherd-character to a defining element of national leadership, but they also now have received prophecies identifying that their God will Himself fulfil that role by appearing to the nation, recovering and restoring the people, and feeding the flock – but also that, somehow, this Shepherd must be struck down.

It is perhaps no coincidence that as we come to the beginning of the New Testament, where we read the wonderful account of the incarnation, 'God manifested in the flesh', that the first group privileged to be called to a personal introduction to the newborn Saviour were, of course, **shepherds**. What a remarkable experience it was for these ordinary labourers!

The Old Testament leads to this point of introduction to the Lord Jesus as the fulfilment of the expectations of the people of Israel. So when Jesus during His time of ministry makes His claim, "I am the good shepherd", for Himself, He is not merely making a claim to His character but is also claiming to be the fulfilment of everything the nation of Israel had been taught to look for – to God Himself leading His people in person as a shepherd. Jesus was to take on everything that was predicted in the Old Testament as the shepherd of Israel who would set to one side the worthless shepherds. But He was also taking on the implied humiliation of the shepherd role, as seen by the world at large and illustrated from the Old Testament.

So let us now consider how the Lord Jesus introduces Himself into His teaching regarding the shepherd, the sheep and the various worthless substitutes to the true shepherd who were vying for the people's adulation. Firstly, let us turn to John 10:1-5, where Jesus begins not with the shepherd but with the adversaries who disturb the safety of the sheep and the sanctity of their home ('the sheepfold').

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber" (John 10:1).

These thieves and robbers attempt to gain hold of the sheep by errant means – they 'climb up some other way.' The only way in is via the door, and only the true shepherd can enter through that door, because the doorkeeper will open only to Him. The sheep then hear the shepherd's voice as He calls each one by name. They know the shepherd's voice – and only His voice, not the voice of strangers.

So far this is incomprehensible to Jesus' listeners. Who are all of these actors in the parable? (see John 10:4). So, with the basis of the illustration being given, Jesus gives his application, explaining His role in two ways. The illustration shows that firstly, He is the door of the sheepfold. To enter via the door – via Christ – is to find first of all, salvation ('he will be saved', v. 9a). But it is also to find life ('going in and out'), provision ('pasture') and relationship ('hear My voice') (v. 16b). So, He comes to give life, unlike a thief who only comes to destroy.

The Living Shepherd Who Must Die

He then proceeds to explain that not only is He the door, but He is also the **good shepherd** of the illustration. But there is something very important to add. This shepherd also 'gives His life for the sheep' (10:11). The sheep face many dangers, and hired hands are simply not up to the job because they do not care for the sheep they are hired to look after. And so again Jesus asserts His position as the 'good shepherd' (10:14), and in particular takes this from the level of mere illustration and brings it into abrupt reality with a claim that asserts His direct relationship to God as His Father: 'As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father' (10:15). As John makes clear earlier in his gospel, Jesus' claim of that special relationship with the Father was correctly understood to be a claim to equality with God (see John 5:18). With this, He brings the people towards a fulfilment of the prophecies that **God Himself**, as shepherd, would personally step in for His people.

There is now also a further and very important clarification made. This 'Shepherd God' is not now only to limit Himself to the people of Israel (although they have particular promises made to them which still have a claim to fulfilment in the future), but He goes on to emphasise, "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (10:16). We have a clear pointer that the relationship of God as a shepherd of His people will not be limited to fulfilment with Israel, but also that Gentiles will be brought into such a relationship too.

As we have seen earlier, the shepherd was to bring salvation in protecting the flock from harm, delivering life, and provide for his flock. And in order to protect the flock, the Good Shepherd was ready to go to the extent of giving His life on behalf of the sheep. As He says in v. 15 – 'I lay down My life for the sheep.' Here we have introduced the expectation that the shepherd's life is to be given up for the preservation of his sheep – and so linking this giving up of His life to His provision of salvation we saw earlier.

The Living Shepherd Who Lives Again

However, we may pause at this point, as Jesus' listeners may well have done, to ask the question: 'What is the enduring benefit of a shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep? For sure, the immediate danger may be dealt with, but who will then feed them, who will keep them safe, and speak to them in the way that they 'know his voice?' So, we come to a critical point in Jesus' claims about His shepherd role and here He clearly moves on from illustration to fulfilment. Giving His life for the sheep (both Jews and Gentiles) is not to be the endpoint of the shepherd's service.

"Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father" (John 10:17-18).

Here He claims that both the laying down of His life, and His taking it up again, are entirely within His own power. For the opposing leaders of the people, the words 'this command I have received from My Father' is a once again a clear claim to equality with God. And so far, the Lord has presented the people with a shepherd who leads, who is known and can be known, who will give up his life for the sheep – and who will just as certainly take it up again. And why will He 'take it up again?' As we have thought, the giving up of His life cannot be the end of the story. There is an ongoing work for the shepherd to do in giving his sheep pasture, protecting them from evil, communing with them – and, essentially, preserving the eternal life of His sheep in His hand. A little later in time (and in the chapter) He is challenged by the Jews as to this teaching. He then identifies a vital feature of His shepherd-work in resurrection:

"And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to

Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one" (John 10:28-30).

Here we have the vital reassuring teaching of our **eternal security** – not merely stated as an irrefutable plain fact (though it is) but also connected to the shepherd-heart of the Lord Jesus. The reason He came into the world was to lay His life down, and then take it up again under His own power, with the express purpose of keeping his sheep in perfect eternal safety.

Some people find this teaching hard to accept. "Yes," they say, "Jesus forgave my sins when I trusted Him, but what about my future sins?" One Christian writer who reflected on this challenge concluded that this could not constitute an insurmountable problem. After all, he wrote, "All my sins were future when Christ died for them."

And so, we can rest on this assurance that the Shepherd God holds us in His hand. We are presented in this chapter with God's "triple-lock" of assurance. Firstly, Christ the Shepherd holds us in His hand. Then we – the sheep – are also enclosed by another hand – the Father's hand, and 'no-one' is able to snatch them out of either place! But we have a third enclosure – the sheepfold itself, guarded by the doorkeeper, who stands as a picture of the Holy Spirit. So, we can be reassured that our triune God is able to keep His people eternally safe!

There was one disciple, Peter, who perhaps knew of responsibility he had personally been given to shepherd the flock when Jesus posed those excruciatingly searching questions to him after His resurrection. "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" – following which, after Peter's protestations that he did indeed, Jesus charged Him to 'feed My sheep' (John 21:17). Thus, Peter was able to relate both to sheep going astray – as he had done spectacularly at the time of the Lord's crucifixion – and to the sheep's restoration to the Shepherd, as the Lord had done for him. So, he speaks out of deep experience, later in life, when he exhorts the elders in the churches:

"Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away" (1 Peter 5:2-4).

Peter knew what it was to have that close relationship with the Chief Shepherd – a shepherd who died but is alive again and lives for us. Not only that, He is to be looked for, as we one day expect His sure return.

We close our consideration of Jesus as our Living Shepherd by the benediction at the ending of the great epistle to the Hebrews:

"Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:20-21).

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on "The Living Shepherd", talk number T1445 in the series, "The Great Shepherd".

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