

Characteristics of the Great Shepherd The Restoring Shepherd

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

00:50 The title "The Great Shepherd" is used of the Lord Jesus Christ in Hebrews 13:20,

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.

The title "The Great Shepherd" highlights Jesus Christ's glorious resurrection and assures us that God is working in us to fulfil His will and glorify Him. The Good Shepherd who died for us is now the Great Shepherd who lives for us. The restoring ministry of Christ as our Great Shepherd began when Jesus was still on earth and continued after His return to heaven.

But first, we must ask what is meant by "restoring ministry." Restoring means to "give back", as in the story of Zacchaeus "...if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." It also refers to "restoring to health" as with the withered hand in Matthew 12:13. "'Stretch out your hand.' And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other." In Galatians 6:1 it means "to mend" in a spiritual sense, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."

In Psalm 23, David writes about the Lord as his shepherd and restoring his soul:

The LORD is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Just as sleep daily refreshes and restores us, so our fellowship with our "Great Shepherd" refreshes and spiritually restores us, equipping us to live for Him day by day. We are given some very practical insights into the Saviour's restorative ministry in the resurrection events recorded at the close of the Gospels. I want to examine these events and identify some of the features that characterise the Restoring Shepherd.

The state of the disciples

We need to begin with the spiritual condition of the disciples at the time of Christ's resurrection. If ever a group of people needed the restoring power of the Great Shepherd, it was the disciples after the horrific death of Jesus. The Person who was the centre of their lives and in whom all their faith and hope had rested was suddenly violently taken from them. They were left scattered, heartbroken, and fearful. Some of them witnessed the Lord lay down His life on the cross. The

secret faith of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus led them to lay Jesus in a tomb in honour of Him rather than hope in Him. The women who had been close to Jesus were compelled by their love for Him to serve Him in death. All the disciples were crushed by His death, and none remembered His promise, as the Good Shepherd, to powerfully rise from the dead as the Great Shepherd.

The Great Shepherd's restoring presence

Throughout the Saviour's capture, judgment, torture, crucifixion, and death, there is evidence of His power. He states this in John 10, in the words,

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 (vv. 17-18).

Those arresting Him fell backwards in His presence (John 18:6). He announced that legions of angels were under His control (Matthew 26:53). He heals the servant of the high priest's ear (Luke 22:51). He confounds His judges, Pilate and Herod, with His grace and silence. On the cross, He forgives, saves, cares, suffers, gives, finishes, and finally powerfully lays down His life.

At His resurrection, the powerful beings Jesus had restrained before Calvary were no longer restrained. It took only one angel to sweep the sealed stone from the mouth of an empty tomb and sat upon it to declare the finished work of redemption. The guards fell in terror before the angel, but he spoke gently to the women in verses 5-6:

Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.

Before the Lord appeared, His restoring ministry had already begun. Not only was the stone rolled away, but the sadness and grief that had engulfed their hearts began to disappear. The angels gave them time to begin to take in the fact that the Good Shepherd, who had the power to lay His life upon the cross, was the same Person who had the power to take it again in resurrection. The Great Shepherd begins His work of restoring the broken hearts of His disciples. But the angels did not stop there, the women who were drawn to the tomb because of the love they had for the Saviour, were given the joyous responsibility to go quickly and tell His disciples (v.7).

Go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you.

They responded immediately and quickly returned, hearts filled with a mixture of holy fear and joy, to tell Christ's disciples the amazing news. But on the journey, Jesus met them and said, "Rejoice!" This immediately draws them to be close to the Saviour in worship. As they did so, Jesus removed fear from their hearts and focused them on the joy of His resurrection and sharing it with His disciples. "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me."

Matthew takes time to explain the futile steps taken by the corrupt spiritual leaders to deceive the people through lies and bribes. Then he closes His Gospel with the meeting between Jesus and His disciples before His ascension. It was a time of worship, and Matthew ends his Gospel with the Saviour's words in verses 18-20:

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.

In Matthew's Gospel, the risen Great Shepherd restored joy where there had been fear, worship where there had been sadness, calling where there had been disarray, and His abiding presence where there had been despair.

It also brings us full circle to two revelations Matthew highlights at the outset of his Gospel when Jesus is described as "Immanuel" and "The King." In Matthew's resurrection chapter, we see Christ's kingship in His words, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth", and we see Him as Immanuel, "God with us", in His words, "I am with you always." All the events of the resurrection reveal not only the power and majesty of Christ but also His character as the restoring Great Shepherd. The greatness of His love is seen at Calvary, when as the Good Shepherd, he lays His life for His sheep. In resurrection, as the Great Shepherd, before returning to heaven, the disciples discover that He is "This same Jesus." His shepherd care, displayed during His ministry on earth, continues after His resurrection, before He ascends in glory into Heaven. They are brought out of all the darkness of feeling the loss of their Lord into understanding His supreme authority and constant presence with them.

The Great Shepherd working with us

Mark also records the resurrection of Jesus in the final chapter of his Gospel. He concentrates on the loving desire of the woman to anoint the body of Jesus. The very large stone is already rolled away. And they saw a young man, an angel, clothed in a long white robe, sitting inside, and they were alarmed. The ministry of the angel was to calm their hearts. He knew why they were there and who they were looking for: "Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified." Then he adds those glorious three words: "He is risen." He confirms, "He is not here," and invites them to see the place where Joseph and Nicodemus had laid Him. As in Matthew's Gospel, the women are assured of Christ's resurrection before they saw Him. Straightaway they're told "But go, tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you."

Mark tells us that the women came to the tomb "Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week" and Christ was already risen. There was no delay in the Lord's resurrection. He had the power to lay down His life and chose the moment to do that (Luke 23). And He had the power to take His life again and chose that moment. Mark writes about Jesus appearing to the eleven and refers to Jesus rebuking the disciples' unbelief and hardness of their hearts before commanding them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." Their preaching would be accompanied by miraculous signs. Mark closes his Gospel with the Lord's ascension, "He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God", and the preaching of the Gospel. He adds, "the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs." Mark writes of Jesus as the perfect Servant of God. Mark knew the restoring power of Jesus in His own life after He had failed in service. And he rejoices to encourage us in the knowledge that as we serve our Saviour, He is "working" with us.

The Great Shepherd restoring affection, understanding, fellowship, and witness

Luke, like Matthew and Mark, writes about the women who were the first to visit Jesus's tomb. Then he tells us about two disciples walking home to a village called Emmaus. They discussed everything that had happened. On this journey, Jesus Himself drew near and went with them, but their eyes were restrained, and they did not recognise Him. There was an important reason for this restraint, as we shall see. This narrative, with its detail, beautifully describes the restorative ministry of the Great Shepherd in the lives of two of His disciples.

Luke is the only Gospel writer to describe Jesus as a young boy visiting the temple in Jerusalem. There, He sat amongst the teachers listening, asking, understanding, and answering. These characteristics reappear on the road to Emmaus: instead of sitting, Jesus walks with His disciples, and listens, asks, understands, and answers.

The restoring ministry of the Great Shepherd is in action whether we are still or in motion. His grace is revealed through His listening ear, genuine concern, compassionate understanding, and restoring power.

We would expect the Lord, who is our Shepherd, to be ahead of His disciples, leading them back to Jerusalem where He wanted them to be. Instead, he approaches them from behind. The disciples were walking ahead, lost in thought as they tried to understand the things that had happened. Jesus walks to catch up with the two disciples, then walks with them, joins their conversation, and asks about their sadness. How often do we walk ahead of the Lord in the sense of trying to work things out without reference to the One who is the “the way, the truth, and life.” Cleopas answers the Saviour quite sharply, “Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?” With astonishing grace Jesus replies with, “What things?” Though Jesus knows everything, He listens to us explain what is in our hearts. We should value every opportunity to speak openly to our Great Shepherd, confident of His care. The disciples related to Jesus what they knew of His suffering and death and the report of His resurrection in verses 19-24:

The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened. Yes, and certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early, astonished us. When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see.

The Great Shepherd highlights the slowness of their faith and, through God's word, gives them the answers they needed about Christ's suffering and glory (Luke 24:25-27).

Then He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.

It was His answers from the word of God that made their hearts burn. This led them to seek His company at home, where their eyes were opened. This raises the question: Why were the disciples prevented from seeing Jesus? The Saviour wanted them to understand the revelation of His presence through the ministry of the word of God. Although they had enjoyed at Jesus' presence on earth, He would soon return to heaven. From then on, His presence and purposes would come through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the opened eyes of faith and the truth of the word of God. Their experience empowered them to return the seven miles to Jerusalem to declare the resurrection of the Lord. The Great Shepherd not only restored them spiritually but also energised them to share the news that “The Lord is risen indeed.” The Great Shepherd gathered His disciples together in fellowship with Himself to know His peace and to show them His wounds, simultaneously demonstrating He had died and was now alive! Then He opens their understanding of the Scriptures (vv. 44-45):

'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.

Jesus led the disciples to Bethany, blessed them, and ascended. Restored, they worshipped and witnessed with renewed faith. Luke continues the theme of restoration in the first chapter of Acts, where the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The question indicates the limited view the disciples had of the grace of God. They were focused on themselves and their nation. Jesus enlarges their vision and calls them to be "[My witnesses] in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Luke's Gospel teaches us so much about the restoring ministry of the Great Shepherd, both with individual disciples and with the whole company of the Lord's disciples. He demonstrates the Great Shepherd restoring faith in Him, affection for Him, understanding of His word, fellowship with His people, worship, and witness to His Person.

The Great Shepherd restores joyfulness

In the final chapter of His Gospel, John records Mary Magdalene's experience as the first person to see the risen Saviour. It is a very beautiful narrative. Her love for the Saviour, who had cast seven demons from her being, compelled her, while it was still dark, to visit the tomb. After seeing that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran to tell Peter and John, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." Peter and John ran to the tomb to see for themselves and found it as Mary had explained. John is the only disciple recorded who "saw and believed." Then Peter and John returned home.

But Mary remained overcome with grief. She looked into the tomb and saw two angels sitting at the head and feet of where the body of Jesus had been laid. The angels asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She explains, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." Then she turns away and sees someone she thought was the gardener, who asks the same question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" and adds, "Whom are you seeking?"

Mary appeals to the supposed gardener, "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Then the Saviour, as the Good Shepherd, "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3). Mary demonstrates what the Lord spoke of in John 10:4:

And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

He called Mary by name, and she immediately recognises His voice and He instantaneously "leads" her out of broken-heartedness into pure joy. Mary had sought a dead Christ and been found by the risen Christ. She was not to cling to her experience of the Saviour on earth but to announce the glorious ascension of Jesus into heaven. She and all the Lord's people would, through the indwelling Holy Spirit, have a new spiritual experience of fellowship with their ascended Head in heaven. A fellowship we have been brought into. We cannot understand Mary's joy when she was delivered from the power of Satan. She was robbed of that joy when Jesus died. As the Great Shepherd, He restored to her heart a fullness of joy she would never lose.

The Great Shepherd restores faith

Later in John 20, the news of Jesus' resurrection drew His disciples together on the evening of the first day of the week. They feared the next steps the Jewish authorities planned would be against them as the disciples of Jesus. They were anxious and afraid. What transformed that evening was

the appearance of Jesus. His first words to His disciples are “Peace be with you.” Then “He showed them the wounds in His hands and His side.” Luke records that He also showed them His wounded feet (Luke 24:38). This display of Christ’s wounds is important because He was, at the same time, demonstrating two vital things. First, that He had died. Second, that He had risen from the dead. The work of redemption was complete and was the basis of the peace He placed in the hearts of His disciples. He restores their broken hearts, filling them with the joy Mary first experienced outside the empty tomb. In anticipation of His ascension into heaven, He repeats His blessing of peace and gives the disciples a token of the Holy Spirit’s coming.

Now one disciple was not there: Thomas. Thomas had the great opportunity to believe in the resurrection of Jesus before He saw Him face to face. But he did not. It was not simply doubt but an exercise of His will. In response to all that he was told by his closest friends and having heard the promise from the lips of Jesus, Thomas remained resolute in His unbelief (v.25). “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.” There are times when we all doubt. But never let us be wilfully unbelieving.

Eight days later, as the disciples gathered, including Thomas, Jesus came through closed doors to stand in the centre of His disciples. His message of peace was constant. Then, in complete grace, He invites Thomas to examine His wounds and encourages Him not to “be unbelieving but believing.” Thomas responds, “My Lord and my God!” The Great Shepherd restored Thomas’s faith. Jesus uses the occasion to joyfully look on to the myriads of people who have, up to the present time, believed in Jesus Christ, having never seen Him. We are part of that company and receive the Great Shepherd’s blessing in verse 29:

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

The Great Shepherd restores Peter

In the final chapter of John’s Gospel, at the close of all four Gospels, Jesus presents Himself in all the wonder of His character as our Great Shepherd. He does this against the background of a fruitless fishing trip instigated by Peter. Peter decides to go fishing: “I am going fishing.” His force of personality attracts his fellow disciples to follow Him, “We are going with you also.” We must be aware of the need to sanctify our natural abilities in the service of God and be careful not to impose our will, intentionally or not, upon others. Peter’s desire to fish was not productive, and that night “they caught nothing.” The event can be seen as an illustration of undertaking the work of God in our own strength, then discovering the Lord’s presence to guide us on the right path. But everything was changed when the morning came and Jesus redirects the disciples (v.6),

['Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish.](#)

This incident is powerfully related to the occasion in Luke 5. In that chapter, Jesus told Peter, “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” (v.4). Peter explained to the Lord that he and his fellow fishermen had worked all night and “caught nothing.” But then he adds, “Nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net” (v. 5). The catch of fish that followed caused Peter to fall at the feet of Jesus and say, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” But, far from distancing Himself from Peter, Jesus calls him to become a “fisher of men” (v.10). Peter finds himself in similar circumstances in John 21, and he was awakened to the presence of Jesus by John telling him, “It is the Lord” (v.7). If Peter felt his sinfulness in his earlier meeting with Jesus in Luke, how much more must he have felt his unworthiness to be in the Lord’s presence after denying Him three times. But instead of remaining at a distance, he felt compelled to be near his Saviour. We must never allow our failure to drive us away from our Saviour but toward him.

When everyone was ashore, Jesus invited them to breakfast. I have always been taught and learned to appreciate that each day we are given should begin in the presence of our Saviour; to abide in Him. The Father reveals his pleasure in His Son. The Holy Spirit's key ministry is to glorify Jesus in our hearts. When we open the Word of God each new day, our prayer should be to see Jesus. In doing this we are in accord with the heart of God the Father and the occupation of the God the Spirit. This was what Jesus taught the two on the road to Emmaus and in their home. It is what inflamed their hearts, sanctified their minds and directed their feet in service.

The risen Saviour gathered the seven disciples around Himself, warmed by a fire He had built, eating food He had prepared and enjoying fellowship He was the centre of as their risen Head. What a contrast to the fire, Peter stood around within sight of the Lord as He suffered the cruelty of His judges. Peter found himself in the company of people with no sympathy for the Saviour and who identified Peter as a disciple of Jesus. As a result, Peter distanced himself from his Lord, denying Him with cursing and swearing that he did not know the Christ he had so wonderfully confessed. We are all capable of dreadful failure that is why we need our Great Shepherd.

The Great Shepherd spoke with tenderness to Peter as he asked him, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" Peter had claimed, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." He told the Good Shepherd, who would lay down His life for His Sheep, that he would "lay down" his life for the sake of the Saviour (John 13:37). Humbled by the Lord's question Peter rests on the Lord's knowledge, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." His answer is the same when he is asked the second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" When the Saviour asks a third time, Peter's heart is pierced, and he replies, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." He declares the supremacy of Christ in the simplicity of those four words, "You know all things." The man who was so certain of himself and discovered the frailty of the human heart cast himself completely, as Thomas did, on His Lord and His God. There is no safer place.

At the beginning of Peter's discipleship, Jesus called him to become an evangelist. The Lord had done this in Matthew 4:19 with the words, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." Prior to returning to heaven, the Great Shepherd restored Peter from the depths of despair to become a gracious shepherd who would "Feed My lambs," "Tend My sheep," and "Feed My sheep." The Risen Lord's last recorded words to Peter in the Gospels are, "You follow me." It is a word for all our hearts. Peter uniquely knew the power of Christ, as the Great Shepherd, to restore and use a failing disciple for His glory. What has taken me a lot of words to say, Peter, as an old apostle, evangelist, shepherd and man, in so few words, perfectly describes the restoring ministry of our Great Shepherd:

Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).

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