

Characteristics of the Great Shepherd The Gathering Shepherd

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

Hello, and welcome to the latest in the series entitled “Aspects of the Great Shepherd” and today we are looking at “The Gathering Shepherd.”

Today, I want to spend some time exploring one of the most comforting, hope-filled, and deeply personal images God gives us in Scripture — the picture of Jesus as the Great Shepherd. Not a distant shepherd, not a hired hand, but a shepherd who knows us, loves us, and gathers us. If you’ve ever felt scattered, or lost, or tired, or unsure which direction to take next, I want to encourage you: the Shepherd sees you. The Shepherd seeks you. And the Shepherd gathers you. This picture isn’t just poetic; it’s practical. Shepherds work hard. They endure weather, danger, darkness, and isolation. They stay awake when others sleep. They make sure the sheep are fed, protected, and found when they wander. And Jesus describes Himself in exactly those terms — the one who leaves the ninety-nine to find the one sheep who has wandered.

But for today’s talk we’re focusing on one particular aspect of His shepherding: Jesus as the Gathering Shepherd. The Shepherd who doesn’t just look after the sheep that happen to be around, but the Shepherd who seeks out, rescues, restores, and brings His flock together. This gathering nature of Jesus is woven all through the Bible — from the Old Testament promises in Ezekiel and Isaiah to the words of Jesus in the Gospels, all the way to the final vision of Revelation where the Lamb is also the Shepherd at the centre of the throne. Today I want us to follow that thread together.

Part 1 – The Shepherd Who Notices the Scattered Sheep

Let’s begin where God Himself begins: with His heart for the sheep. In Ezekiel 34, God speaks with strength, sorrow, and compassion about the condition of His people. They have been neglected by leaders who should have cared for them. Instead of feeding the flock, the leaders fed themselves. Instead of protecting the weak, they exploited them. And so, the sheep became scattered — exposed, vulnerable, pushed to the edges. But listen to what God says in verses 11 and 12:

I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out... so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day.

Every time I read that, something in me rests. The God of heaven doesn’t delegate the work of care. He doesn’t pass the job to an angel or another human being. He says, “I myself will search.” Those three words could carry an entire sermon. This tells us something precious: God does not wait for us to find Him. He comes looking for us. He doesn’t limit His care to those who are already safe, already sorted, already close. He goes out to the edges, to the hidden places, to the wounded places.

Maybe today you feel like one of the scattered sheep. Maybe life has felt like “a day of clouds and darkness.” God is declaring over you: I myself will search for you. He sees where you are — emotionally, spiritually, physically. You are not overlooked. You are not one of many faces in a crowd. You are known. The world we live, in which we are taught from a young age that there is no God and that we are just the same as an animal, can make us feel worthless. Or that any worth we may attain to only comes from what we can achieve by our own efforts. Materialism has become the new god for many people, and it leaves us disappointed, irrespective of how well or how poorly we have achieved.

When a shepherd in ancient Israel counted his sheep at the end of the day, he didn't think, “Ninety-nine out of a hundred will do.” Good shepherds knew their sheep by name. Each one mattered. Each one had value. And when one was missing, it wasn't a statistic — it was personal. God's gathering heart starts with His noticing heart. He gathers because He sees. He gathers because He knows. He gathers because He cares.

The prophecy of Ezekiel doesn't only have a message for today in respect of the gathering shepherd, it is also prophetic for a day still to come in the future when the Great Gathering Shepherd will gather together again all his ancient people from the four corners of the earth. Currently, due to the various dispersions of the children of Israel and their integration into the nations, there are many who have no idea that their earthly lineage can be traced back to Abraham, Issac and Jacob. Due to failure on their part and hostility from their enemies many are scattered and mingled with the nations of the earth. In Revelation chapter 7 we read of those being brought together from all the tribes of the children of Israel. Very few Jewish people of today can say which tribes they come from apart from Judah and Benjamin, the two tribes who made up the southern nation of Judah. The Northern nation of Israel was scattered among the nations, but will all be brought together again for blessing in a day yet to come. In Revelation chapter 7 we read of each of the tribes of Israel, the Sons of Jacob, who will have a great number sealed for blessing in a future day. Interesting to note however that Dan is not mentioned in this list, instead it is replaced by Manasseh. It may well be that the message of Jacob about his sons as recorded in Genesis chapter 49 where he prophetically refers to Dan as a “serpent by the way” and the “adder in the path” are an allusion to the antichrist, instigated by Satan, rising out of the tribe of Dan. Also, as well as been known as an aggressive tribe they abandoned their land detailed in Joshua chapter 19 to migrate to the very north of the land of Israel as we read in Judges chapter 18.

Part 2 – The Shepherd Who Searches

If you've ever watched sheep — even briefly — you'll know they are easily distracted. They wander without realising they're wandering. They follow a patch of grass, or a noise, or each other, and suddenly they're far from where they should be. They don't get lost deliberately. It just happens. And isn't that true of us? Sometimes we drift because life is busy. Or because we've been hurt. Or because something else captured our attention. Or because the world is noisy and the Shepherd's voice feels faint. But the good news is this: Jesus is not angry with wandering sheep. He goes looking for them. He tells the parable in Luke 15:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

Until he finds it. Not “until he gets tired.” Not “until he decides he has enough sheep already.” Not “until the sheep really should have known better.” That's the persistence of the Shepherd. And when He finds the sheep, Jesus doesn't shout. He doesn't drag it back. He doesn't punish it. He joyfully puts it on His shoulders and carries it home. That's the gathering Shepherd: the one who searches until He finds and then carries every one of us until we're safe.

Maybe you've wandered emotionally. Maybe you've wandered in faith. Maybe you've drifted from prayer or fellowship or the Scriptures. Maybe regret or weariness or disappointment has pulled you off the path. The Shepherd isn't shaking His head. He's already looking for you.

Part 3 – Jesus Fulfils the Promise of the Gathering Shepherd

Let's move to the New Testament — because Jesus doesn't just use shepherd language; He fulfils it. In John 10:11, Jesus stands in front of the religious leaders and the crowds and says:

I am the good shepherd.

Not a shepherd. Not like a shepherd. But The shepherd. The promised one. The expected one. The one Ezekiel and Isaiah described. But there's a verse here that is central to our theme today — verse 16:

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.

Here it is again: the gathering heart of God. Jesus sees beyond the borders of Israel. Beyond ethnicity. Beyond culture. Beyond the people who already believe. He sees the nations. The outsiders. The overlooked. The ones nobody else is looking for. "I must bring them also," He says. Not "I might." Not "I'll try." But "I must." This is His mission. And He gathers them the same way He gathers us — not by force, not by manipulation, but by speaking. "They will listen to my voice." That's how He gathers: Not through pressure. Not through guilt. Not through fear. But through His voice.

There is something about the voice of Jesus — through Scripture, through the Spirit, through the gospel — that reaches the human heart like nothing else. People recognise truth. They recognise love. They recognise hope. And even if they can't articulate it, they respond to the Shepherd's voice. And when He gathers, He makes one flock. Not divided. Not competing. Not fractured by class or background or history. But One flock for there is only One Shepherd.

This is what the Shepherd is still doing today. And if you've ever felt like an outsider, like you're not quite sure where you fit in, hear this: Jesus already had you in mind when He said, "I have other sheep... I must bring them also." In the Old Testament days before the Son of God came into the world, the blessing of God was primarily to the people of Israel, God's chosen people. All this changed when the Eternal Son of God stepped into time as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem. It should never fail to fill us with thankfulness and awe and draw from us praise and worship as we consider the enormity of this, the greatest event ever to take place in the history of this world. The moment when God made himself known, manifested in flesh, in a way never seen before so that every person can see and know the heart of God - that He loves us and wants to have a relationship with us. In chapter 1 of John's Gospel verse 11 we read:

He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.

"His own" were the flock of Israel and they rejected Him. Remember the crowd when the Lord was put before them before He was crucified? They cried, "Away with Him." And, "We will not have this man to reign over us." The message of the Gospel, the call of the Shepherd, then started to go out to the whole world, to all people, and, as John chapter 3 puts it, to whosoever will believe.

Part 4 – The Shepherd Who Carries the Weak

One of the most tender verses in the entire Bible is Isaiah 40:11:

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.

We often imagine God as strong — and He is. But this verse shows us His gentleness. He doesn't gather the lambs and then push them to walk faster. He doesn't gather the injured and then scold them for slowing the group down. He carries them. Close. Near His heart. Sometimes in life we reach a point where we can't walk. Not emotionally... not spiritually... not even physically. We're too tired, too burdened, too confused. And in those moments, the Shepherd doesn't abandon us — He lifts us. If the Shepherd had said, "I only gather the strong," most of us would never make it. But He gathers the weak, the fragile, the grieving, the overwhelmed. This is good news for all of us, because every believer has seasons of weakness. Think of David in Psalm 23:

He restores my soul.

Restoring a soul takes gentleness. It takes time. It takes patience. The Shepherd restores — not by pushing us harder, but by drawing us closer. Gathering us up to Himself. Some of you listening may feel like you've been limping for a long time. Maybe you haven't had spiritual strength in months. Maybe your prayers feel hollow or your hope feels worn thin. The good news today is that the Shepherd is not waiting for you to get it together. He carries. He gathers. He restores.

Part 5 – Why We Need Gathering

But let's be honest: gathering isn't always easy. Sheep scatter for many reasons, and humans scatter for even more. Also, if you have ever observed a flock of sheep, it just takes one to break rank and they are all away! Again, so like us humans! How often in the history of the Church have many been scattered just because one or two have broken rank? Something the apostles warned against in the earliest letters to the Churches.

Some scatter because of fear, or hurt, or because of temptation, and some even because of shame. In all of these instances and perhaps many more it is because they were never truly shepherded. How often it is those who have been given, or taken, the role to shepherd the flock of God are those who have caused them to be scattered. This both damages the flock but also gives a very poor witness to the world outside. I am always saddened by how many times people will have something against Christianity because of what they have seen or heard; or how they have been treated by Christians. It is always important in such conversations that we focus their minds on Christ Himself and what He has done and said but this can often take a lot of effort on their part to get over their initial thoughts. But Jesus doesn't just gather us to save us — He gathers us to protect us. Sheep are safest in a flock. Alone, they are vulnerable. A scattered believer is always a vulnerable believer — vulnerable to discouragement, to isolation, to lies, to temptation. One of the ways Jesus gathers His people is through fellowship — through bringing us into community, as the body of Christ, into relationships in which we can be encouraged, challenged, strengthened, held accountable, prayed for, and loved.

The Shepherd not only gathers us to Him; He gathers us to each other. In my local church, we often sing two hymns that have the same first line of the first verse. One begins, "Gathered to Thy name Lord Jesus" and goes on to say, "Gathered here with one accord." The other continues, "Losing sight of all but Thee." Both of these hymns, often sung at the beginning of our breaking of bread service, remind us of the wonderful privilege we have to come together, in spite of all our differences, weaknesses, concerns and failings, to have Him in the midst of us and as the main reason for our gathering. We have not come to learn, nor to be encouraged, although we usually are, but we have primarily come together to remember our Lord in His death as he asked us to do on that very night before He was taken to be crucified. At that point in the Passover Supper, when perhaps His betrayal was already underway, Judas went out into the night. John's Gospel chapter 13 verse 30 tells us,

Having received the piece of bread, [Judas] then went out immediately.
And it was night.

It would seem that Judas missed out on the most beautiful moment when the Lord instituted the Lord's Supper and also went on to teach His disciples the most amazing truths that would come to be known as the Upper Room Ministries. This is a wonderful picture of the Great Shepherd gathering up His flock at the most difficult time for them, whereas Judas had gone out into the night, the physical night but also the dark night for his soul, for we are told in Matthew chapter 27 that he hanged himself.

We live in a world that is increasingly disconnected. Loneliness is rising. People live near one another without truly being with one another. We need the gathering Shepherd now more than ever. And this is part of His restoring work: He brings us near Him, and He brings us near one another. If you've been isolated — not by choice but by circumstances — ask Him to gather you again. If you've withdrawn because of hurt, ask Him to heal and restore. If you've drifted quietly from fellowship, let Him lead you back into the community of your local church. You don't have to navigate this alone. The Shepherd gathers.

Part 6 – The Shepherd Who Leads Us All the Way Home

The gathering doesn't stop here on earth. Scripture paints a glorious picture of the final gathering — the gathering to end all gatherings — when Jesus brings His people home. In Revelation 7:17, we're given a breathtaking promise:

For the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Think about that. The Lamb — the one who sacrificed Himself — becomes the Shepherd — the one who leads us for eternity. This is where the story ends: with the Shepherd at the centre, with His people gathered, with no more wandering, no more sorrow, no more danger, no more fear. The Shepherd who gathers us now will gather us forever. And nothing — not sin, not suffering, not death — can separate us from His care.

Part 7 – The Shepherd for the Person Who Feels Lost Today

As we come towards the end of this message, let me speak directly to whoever is listening today and quietly thinking, "This is me. I feel lost. I feel far away. I feel like I've drifted." You may feel like you're miles from where you used to be, or where you want to be. You may feel unsure how to pray, how to come back, how to start again. The Shepherd doesn't need you to have the perfect words. He doesn't need you to tidy yourself up, He doesn't need promises you can't keep. He needs only this: that when He calls, you answer. You don't gather yourself. He gathers you. You don't fix yourself. He restores you. You don't carry yourself. He carries you. You don't find your way home. He comes and brings you home. If you listen closely — in Scripture, in prayer, in your own heart — you may hear Him even now: that still, gentle, unmistakable voice saying, "Come. Come home. Come back. I'm here." And when you turn — even slightly — you won't find a Shepherd who is disappointed. You'll find a Shepherd who is already running toward you. In same way as the Father, in the Parable of the Lost Son in Luke chapter 15, when the son was still a great way off and his father saw him, had compassion on him and came running towards him. No explanation or the apology the son had rehearsed, just unconditional love and forgiveness. Jesus is the Great Shepherd. The seeking Shepherd. The restoring Shepherd. The carrying Shepherd. The protecting Shepherd. The Shepherd who gathers.

He gathers the wandering. He gathers the weak. He gathers the outsider. He gathers the broken. He gathers the nations. He gathers His church. And one day, He will gather us forever into His presence. Wherever you are today — spiritually, emotionally, physically — the Shepherd knows.

He sees. He comes. And He gathers. If you hear His voice today, don't harden your heart. Let Him gather you. Let Him restore you. Let Him lead you. Let Him hold you. Because there is no safer place, no kinder place, no stronger place, than in the arms of the Great Shepherd — the Gathering Shepherd — who loves His flock and never lets them go.

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