

The Good Shepherd

By David Feddes

“The Lord is my shepherd.” That’s one Bible verse almost everyone knows. It’s the first sentence many little children memorize in Sunday schools and synagogues. It’s often printed on sympathy cards and funeral programs. If you know little else about the Bible, you may at least know those words from Psalm 23. “The Lord is my shepherd”—you probably know the sentence. But do you know the Shepherd? Jesus says in John 10:11, “I am the good shepherd.” Jesus is saying that he himself is the Lord God, the divine shepherd spoken of in so many parts of Scripture. Let’s look at seven things the good shepherd, Jesus, does for his sheep.

The Shepherd Selects

First, the good shepherd selects his sheep. He knows each one by name and singles them out individually.

I grew up on a ranch where my family raises cattle. When city friends or relatives visited us in the country, they were amazed at how my father and brothers could look at cattle out in a pasture, sometimes even far away, and know exactly which was which. “How can you tell them apart?” these city slickers would wonder. “A cow is a cow. They all look the same to me.” Exactly. If you don’t know cattle, they all look the same, but a real rancher knows each individual in his herd. In the same way, a real shepherd knows his sheep. He knows each individual, even if they all look the same to the untrained eye.

I don’t live on a ranch any more. Now I live in the huge metropolitan area of Chicago. Around such a mass of people, it’s hard to avoid the feeling that I’m just one more face in the crowd, just a number in some computer somewhere. That’s when I’m glad to know that the good shepherd can pick me out, even from such a huge herd of humanity. He has selected me as one of his sheep, and he knows me personally. Jesus says,

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice (John 10:3-5).

Jesus selects his sheep individually. That’s why certain people trust him and follow him even when many others refuse to listen. Jesus told some of his opponents, “You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:26-27). Wherever the good news of Jesus is heard, some people remain indifferent, but Jesus makes sure that every individual sheep he has selected will hear him and respond to his voice.

The Bible tells about a woman named Lydia who ran a clothing business. One day she was part of a group of people who listened to the apostle Paul talking about Jesus. As Lydia listened, she knew that the Lord was speaking to her, that the message was meant for her personally. The Bible says, “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message” (Acts 16:14). She recognized the voice of her shepherd.

Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:14). Jesus knew a sheep named Lydia, and he opened her heart. He knew a sheep named David Feddes, and he opened my heart. He’s got a lot of other sheep as well, and maybe you’re one of them. If so, you’ll know he’s calling your name. The good shepherd selects his sheep, he singles them out one at a time, and they recognize his voice.

The Shepherd Sacrifices

Second, the good shepherd sacrifices for his sheep. Jesus says,

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. (John 10:11-13)

Some religious leaders are just hired hands. They tend a flock as long as it pays, and they may preach a message of health and wealth, but at the first sign of trouble or danger, they flee. But what does the good shepherd do when his sheep are threatened? What does Jesus do when the ones he's always known by name are in danger of being forever lost? He lays down his own life to rescue them.

Jesus' death was not a matter of him getting caught in the wrong place at the wrong time before he had a chance to get away. He saw it coming, but he deliberately chose to die so that his sheep could receive life. Jesus said, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:18).

Isn't that amazing? A shepherd might be willing to take some risks to save his sheep, but he wouldn't deliberately choose certain death. However, the good shepherd did exactly that. Jesus died for his sheep when they least deserved it. Isaiah 53 says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all ... he was led like a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:6-7). We sheep got ourselves into trouble, and the good shepherd became a lamb and went to the slaughter in our place. The Son of God became a man and chose to lay down his life. The good shepherd sacrifices himself for his sheep.

The Shepherd Satisfies

A third dimension of a shepherd's work is that he satisfies his sheep. In Psalm 23 the Bible says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul." The good shepherd gives his sheep what they need to be satisfied and content.

In his book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Phillip Keller says, "It is almost impossible for sheep to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met." First, because sheep are so timid, "they refuse to lie down unless they are free of all fear." Second, "because of the social behavior within a flock, sheep will not lie down unless they are free from friction with others of their kind." Third, sheep won't lie down if they're being tormented by flies and parasites. And fourth, sheep won't lie down if they feel they need more food. They must be free from hunger.

In other words, when a shepherd makes his sheep lie down, he's accomplished quite a bit. He's protected them against fear, he's helped them overcome tension and fights among the members of the flock, he's helped them deal with aggravations and distractions, and he's given them plenty to eat and drink.

The Bible tells us about two sisters, Mary and Martha, who had Jesus over to their home. Mary stayed close to Jesus, enjoying his company and hanging on every word he said. But Martha was busy, distracted by all the details of serving her guests. Martha didn't know much about lying down in green pastures or resting beside quiet waters, and she got irritated that Mary was staying next to Jesus instead of helping her.

She came to [Jesus] and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:40-42)

In our hectic lives, we’re busy with so many things, and we may even resent those who enjoy satisfaction, who are tranquil and at peace. That’s the Martha Syndrome. But Jesus says that when we’re upset and worried by many things, only one thing is necessary to settle us down: we need to stay close to him, to sit at the feet of the shepherd, to enjoy green pastures and quiet waters in his presence, to find contentment in him. The good shepherd is the only one who can calm the turmoil and satisfy the needs of his restless sheep.

The Shepherd Sustains

A fourth thing that the good shepherd does is closely related: he sustains his sheep when they are weak and tired and sick. Jesus knows when one of his sheep is too small and immature to keep up with others. The Bible says, “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (Isaiah 40:11). Jesus also knows when someone is sick or injured and in need of special help and support. The Lord promises, “I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak” (Ezekiel 34:16).

A shepherd or rancher who really knows his livestock individually also has a sharp eye for how each animal is feeling. A city slicker might notice that something is wrong only if the animal is stone dead with four legs sticking up in the air. But a good rancher notices right away when the ears are drooping slightly, when the animal isn’t eating quite right, when the eyes look dull and listless, or when a foot begins to swell. He’s quick to notice any animal that needs special help or medication.

That’s true of ordinary ranchers and shepherds, and it’s certainly true of the good shepherd. Jesus knows your illnesses and weakness. He’s able to heal you when you’re sick and carry you when you’re exhausted. The Bible tells the story of a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years.

She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was free from her suffering.

At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?”

“You see the people crowding against you,” his disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’”

But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

You see, this suffering woman was not just part of a crowd. She mattered to Jesus. The good shepherd not only healed her, he singled her out from the crowd, even though she was shaking with fear, so he could commend her for her faith and give her his personal words of blessing and encouragement. Yes indeed, Jesus sustains his weak, sick, frightened sheep.

The Shepherd Steers

A fifth aspect of the shepherd's work is that he steers his sheep in the right direction. Psalm 23 says, "He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." When sheep are left to themselves, they aren't very smart. They don't know very much, and they need a shepherd to lead them.

The Bible tells how Jesus encountered a large crowd, and when he saw them, "he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things" (Mark 6:34). Jesus knows that we're lost without a shepherd to show us the way, so he teaches us. He leads us in the paths of righteousness.

When Jesus looks at the crowds that live in our cities and suburbs and villages and farms, he must see so many who are like sheep without a shepherd. We live in a very complex world; we're surrounded by a million different ideas and opinions; we're exposed to so many different morals and lifestyles. Who knows what's right? Who's to say what's wrong? It's easy to become hopelessly confused, with no sense of direction.

But we don't have to live like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus is the good shepherd, and when we know him, he teaches and guides us. His words and his example lead us in the right path, and we can be sure the good shepherd is steering us in the right direction.

The Shepherd Seeks

One of the most encouraging facts about the good shepherd is that he seeks sheep that are lost and wandering.

In the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, the Lord says, "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them ... I will search for the lost and bring back the strays" (Ezekiel 34:11, 16). We saw a moment ago that Jesus guides us in the right paths through his teaching, but, thank God, that's not all he does. He's also willing to go looking for us when we wander from those paths of righteousness and get ourselves lost.

Maybe you've wandered a long way from Jesus, and you see little hope of ever finding him back. Maybe you've been a dumb and ornery sheep and you've gotten yourself hopelessly lost. If so, don't give up just yet. You may not be able to find your way back to the shepherd, but that doesn't mean the shepherd can't find you. We've all gone astray, we've all gone our own way, but Jesus laid down his life to pay for all that, and now he's able to seek us out and find us and bring us back.

Let me mention just a few examples from the Bible. Mary Magdalene was demon-possessed, but Jesus still found her. Zaccheus was a money-grubbing cheater, but Jesus still found him. A Samaritan woman had gone through five broken marriages, but Jesus found her. The apostle Paul was once a murderous bigot, but Jesus found him. The list could go on and on.

So if you've wandered away from Jesus, don't assume you'll be lost forever. And if you're a Christian yourself but someone you love—a brother or sister, a son or daughter, a parent or a friend—has strayed from the right path, don't give up praying. Remember, there's nothing the shepherd enjoys more than finding lost sheep and bringing them home. Jesus says in Luke 15,

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:4-7).

The Shepherd Secures

Now for the seventh and final part of the shepherd's work that we're going to look at: the good shepherd secures his sheep. He protects and defends them against every danger.

Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:27-29).

When the good shepherd calls your name, when he seeks you out and gives you faith in him, you belong to him forever. You are secure. The Lord says, "I give them eternal life." How long is eternal life? How long does it last? For the next two weeks? For the next ten years? Until something comes along that destroys your faith? No, eternal life lasts for eternity. Otherwise, it wouldn't be *eternal*. Jesus says, "They shall *never* perish." He doesn't say they might perish as soon as something goes wrong. He says they shall never perish, and never means never! It's not going to happen. Not one of Jesus' sheep will perish.

If you watch TV or go to films, you've probably seen a number of cliffhanger scenes. One person is dangling from the edge of a cliff or the ledge of a tall building, holding on to someone else's hand. The camera zeroes in on the fingers of the two people as they try desperately to hang on to each other. Maybe you think about salvation that way. You're dangling over the pit of hell, and you're afraid you'll fall in unless you're able to hold on to Jesus. Sometimes your faith becomes tired. You feel like you're losing your grip, and you don't know how much longer you'll be able to hold on to Jesus.

But did it ever occur to you that your safety depends not so much on the fact that you're holding on to Jesus as on the fact that Jesus is holding on to you? Your safety is not found in strength of your grip on him, but in the strength of his grip on you. When you belong to the good shepherd, you're in good hands, and you're in strong hands. Jesus says, "No one can snatch [my sheep] out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:27-29). The only way a sheep of Jesus can be lost is if someone is able to break the iron grip that God has on us, and that's not going to happen. Once the Lord lays hold of you, nothing and nobody can pull you completely away from him.

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." I hope you're starting to see just how good he really is. If you already trust Jesus, you need to know how blessed you are. If you don't yet belong to Jesus, you need to know what you're missing.

There's nothing better than to be able to say with confidence, "The Lord is my shepherd." Before I ever knew him, my shepherd *selected* me and called me by name. When I was guilty and in danger of hell, my shepherd *sacrificed* himself for me. When I'm hungry and restless, my shepherd *satisfies* me. When I'm sick and weak, my shepherd *sustains* me and heals me. When I'm confused, my shepherd *steers* me in the right path. When I've wandered away, my shepherd *seeks* me out and brings me back. When I'm afraid, my shepherd *secures* me and protects me from everything that endangers my soul. His goodness and mercy go with me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. The Lord is my shepherd; he's everything I need. Is he your shepherd too?