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THE SHEPHERD and His Sheep

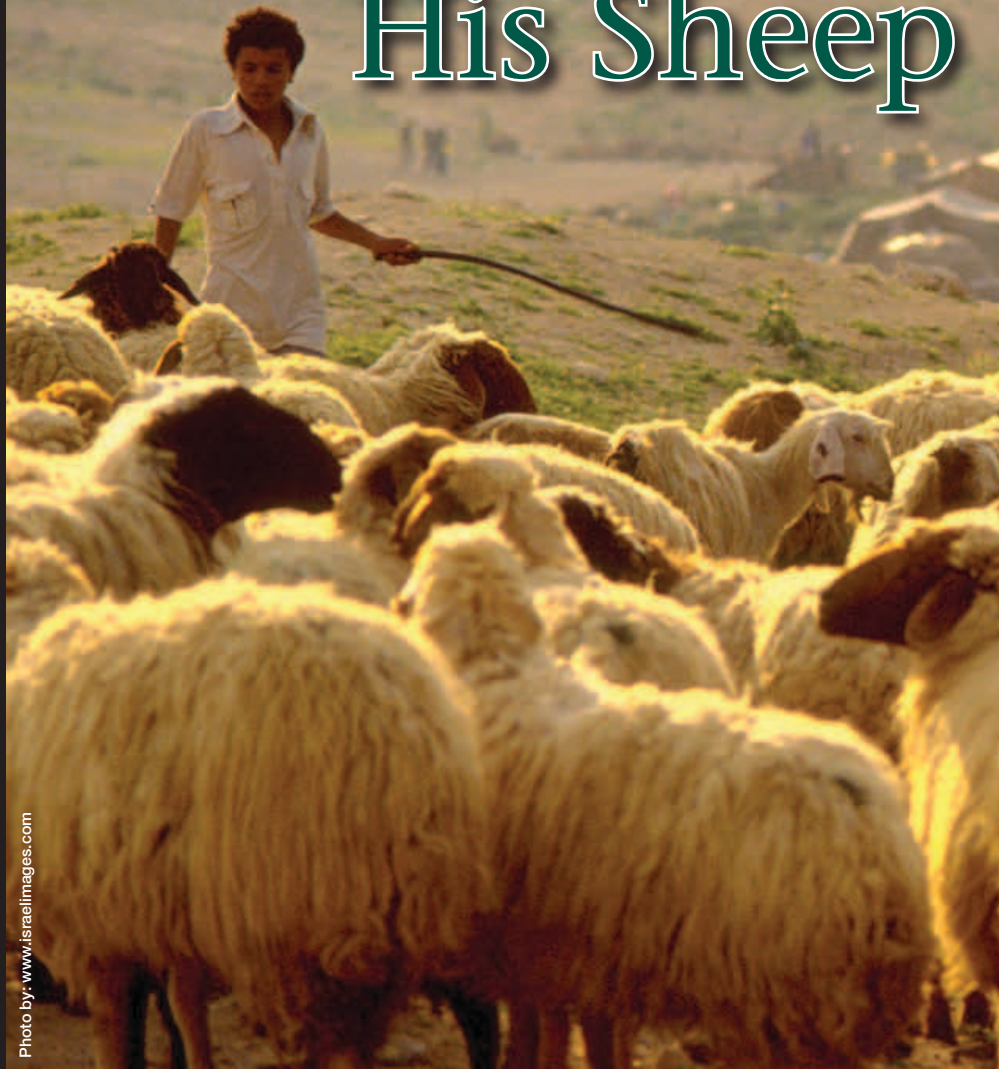


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THE SHEPHERD and His Sheep



THE BIBLE IS FULL OF RICH imagery to help its readers better understand deep spiritual truths. One of the oft repeated images is that of a shepherd with his sheep. The prophets spoke of good shepherds and corrupt shepherds. God is referred to as our Shepherd. One of the most beloved of all psalms, by both Christians and Jews, is Psalm 23. I memorized it as a child, as I am sure many of you did. It communicates the great care that the Lord has for His people. Yeshua (Jesus) referred to Himself as the “good shepherd.” Lately, I have been reflecting on the characteristics of a shepherd. What can we learn from this ancient occupation?

Responsibilities of a Shepherd

Leaders are frequently referred to as shepherds in Scripture. Since shepherds were responsible for the well-being of the sheep and, in every way, guarded and provided for them, this is an apt analogy, and one which would have communicated graphically to the people of the Bible who lived close to the land. Using an image such as a shepherd, the biblical writers communicated much more than the simple words we read. Instantly, the original hearers of the Word thought of the all-encompassing care that a shepherd took for this flock. In Israel, the shepherd acted in every way as a leader. The shepherd led the sheep to food and water; he protected against wild animals, inclement weather, and unscrupulous individuals.

Recently, while on a walk with my husband Tom in northern Israel, we observed a shepherd walking up a hillside. His sheep followed behind him; he expected them to follow. He didn't have a dog herding the sheep. He rarely turned around to look at the sheep; he just steadily climbed the steep, rocky hillside. We stood and watched for some time, as most of the sheep kept their eyes on the shepherd and docilely followed along. To our amusement,

“I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

there were four sheep that had other ideas in mind. They seemed to be going their own way. I became a little concerned for them that they would be lost, but Tom told me to just keep watching. Sure enough, after some time, they suddenly turned their heads toward the shepherd. Running and leaping over rocks, they caught up with the flock. It was fascinating to watch.

At one point, the shepherd stopped walking and faced the flock. When the sheep saw he was standing still, they earnestly began to eat every green morsel in sight. At the end of a long, hot summer with no rain, the hills looked barren and dry, but somehow, the shepherd had found a spot where the sheep could eat. In Israel, it does not rain for more than half the year. From May until October, it is extremely rare to have any rain, so a pasture isn't green.

Many of us come from countries where our mental images of sheep are of lush meadows with beautiful white, fluffy sheep dotting the landscape. In my travels to Wales and New Zealand, I have seen many such pastoral places. These scenes are beautiful and very peaceful. When standing there, I have immediately thought of the 23rd Psalm. However, that is not the type of scene the biblical writers envisioned when they thought about sheep and shepherds. You see, sheep in Israel do not graze in lush green

pastures. There are some lovely green valleys in Israel, but they are reserved for growing crops. Sheep are led to graze in areas not suitable for agriculture, including the rocky, barren hilltops. This is an entirely different picture from the lush green fields in Wales, but this is exactly the conditions that are normal for Israel, now and in biblical times.

If the reality for sheep in Israel is rocky hilltops, which for at least half the year are brown, not green, then what is being communicated in Psalm 23 when it says the Lord “*makes me lie down in green pastures*”? Readers

of the day would have understood this to be a promise of extravagant blessings from the Good Shepherd. The Shepherd of Psalm 23 not only provides for the needs of the sheep, He provides them with abundant blessings, beyond what they could expect.

Ezekiel 34:1–10 talks about bad shepherds. By the list of things God says these bad shepherds didn't do, we can get a good picture of what a good shepherd was meant to do. A good shepherd strengthens the weak, heals the sick, binds up the broken, searches for lost sheep, delivers the captive sheep, gathers the dispersed sheep, and feeds the hungry sheep (vv. 4–5). A good shepherd puts the welfare of the sheep above his own well-being. Yeshua said, “*I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep*” (John 10:11).



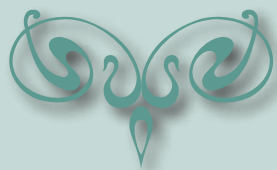


The Lord Is My Shepherd

Repeatedly, throughout Scripture, we see the Lord described as a shepherd. Probably the most famous passage is the 23rd Psalm, but there are many other references as well. When the Children of Israel left Egypt, they were totally dependent on the Lord. When He moved, they moved. When He stood still, they stayed camped. By day, He led them with a cloud and by night with a pillar of fire. Scrip-

“You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.”

Psalm 77:20



ture says, *“You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron”* (Psalm 77:20).

God provided their daily food, the miracle food manna. He provided water in the wilderness. He protected them from Pharaoh and his armies and subsequent armies who attacked them. The Bible says that He even took care of the details of their lives. Imagine their shoes didn't wear out! That is truly a miracle of provision. The psalmist describes this time in Israel's history this way: *“He made His own people go forth like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock; and He led them on safely, so that they did not fear”* (Psalm 78:52).

Imagine yourself in their situation. They had only the possessions they could carry. They had no transportation. They had left behind the only homes they had ever known, their occupations, and their livelihood. They could not even provide their most basic needs of food, water, and shelter. The children of Israel were totally vulnerable. When you read the biblical accounts, you see how they struggled with this total reliance on the Lord. Often, we find them complaining to Moses. Even so, God was leading them, providing for them, and protecting them.

Other Scriptures show that God continues to act as a shepherd. Passages which speak of the return of the Jewish people to Israel from the lands of their dispersion, which is happening in our own times, speak of the Lord bringing them back and caring for them as a shepherd. *“Behold the LORD God shall come with a strong hand,....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). *“He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock”* (Jeremiah 31:10b). *“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’”* (Ezekiel 34:11-12).

Responsibilities of Sheep

As far as I can see, there are three main responsibilities of sheep. They must know the shepherd, recognize his voice, and follow him.

Knowing the Shepherd

"Know that the LORD, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture" (Psalm 100:3). Yeshua said, *"I am the good shepherd, and I know my sheep and am known by My own"* (John 10:14). In English, the meaning of "know" is most commonly associated with knowledge. However, the biblical idea of knowing God has a much deeper level, an intimate knowledge that comes from spending time with Him. The Hebrew word for "know" is *yadah*. Intimate relationships between husband and wife are described using this word, as: *"Now Adam knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain..."* (Genesis 4:1a). Theoretical knowledge is not enough. We must know God with our heart, not just our mind.

I grew up in a Christian home with parents who loved God and the Bible. They instilled the Word in us, so I had a good knowledge base of the Bible. In fact, at age eight, I read the Bible through for the first time. But the knowledge alone was not enough. I needed a personal relationship with the Lord. That requires spending time with the Shepherd and really getting to know Him, through prayer, worship, and reading the Bible and meditating on it.

Recognizing the Voice of the Shepherd

As we spend time with the Lord, we learn to recognize when He is speaking. When my husband calls me on the phone, I never have to ask "Who is this?" because I immediately recognize his voice. Yeshua said that sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd. *"But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers...My sheep hear My voice, and I know them and they follow Me"* (John 10:2-5, 27).

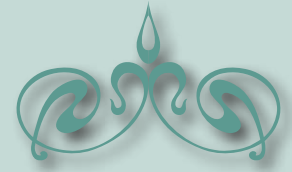
Following the Shepherd

It is possible to know the Shepherd, recognize His voice, and still choose not to follow Him. But, following is the most crucial part for the sheep. A sheep that hears the shepherd's voice and does not follow is not going to enjoy the provision of the shepherd. He will be isolated from the flock and vulnerable to the attacks of wild animals, as well as the elements. He will not know where to find provision.

Only the one who follows the Shepherd enjoys all the benefits He provides. In order to follow, we must keep our ears tuned for the voice of the Shepherd and keep our eyes on the Shepherd. When He moves, those who are attentive to His voice and movements will immediately move with Him and enjoy the provision, protection, and safety He provides.

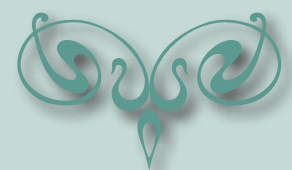
Good Shepherds Make Good Leaders

Interestingly, two of the larger-than-life leaders in the Bible were shepherds: Moses and King David. God called both of these men to become great leaders in Israel while they were occupied as shepherds. It was on the lonely, barren hilltops that they learned to be leaders. In solitude, they learned the lessons of listening to and communing with God.



"...the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers... My sheep hear My voice, and I know them and they follow Me."

John 10:3, 5, 27





They learned to be ready to deal with any threat or problem that endangered the flock.

David cited some of these abilities when talking Saul into letting him fight Goliath. *"But David said to Saul, 'Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard and struck and killed it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God.'* Moreover, David said, *"The LORD, who delivered me from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine"* (1 Samuel 17:34–37a). David had the courage to go after the lion and the bear. He cared enough about the sheep to put his own life in danger. All the while, he knew that God was the One who delivered him as he stepped out in faith to deal with the perils that came his way.

Moses was a leader appointed by God to lead the Children of Israel. Moses did not lead with arrogance but instead recognized that he was totally reliant on the leadership of the Lord. He chose to spend time with God; in fact, he spent so much time with the Lord that his face shone. He knew that going the Lord's way was imperative to success. *"Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know [yadah] You and that I may find grace in Your sight, and consider that this nation is Your people.'* And He said, *'My presence will go with you and I will give you rest.'* Then he said to Him, *'If Your presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here'"* (Exodus 33:13–15).

God puts leaders in place to shepherd His people. A wise leader recognizes the responsibilities, is faithful to act, but knows that his strength comes from the Lord. As the wise leader follows the Good Shepherd, he or she finds success, safety, and provision. In reading the accounts of the kings of Judah and Israel, I am struck by how a king was judged as good or evil in the sight of the Lord. It really all boils down to one thing. Good kings followed the Lord and did what was right in God's sight, and evil kings did what was right in their own eyes (i.e., 1 Kings 22:42–43, 51–53). Like rebellious sheep, they went their own way.

I have been a follower, and I am now a leader. Or you could say that I have been a sheep and am now a shepherd. I have learned that leadership is not for the weak, lazy, or unsure. Leadership requires courage, faithfulness, faith, energy, compassion, and the ability to make decisions. The shepherd's responsibility is never ending. There are always sheep in need of care and feeding. God demands that the shepherds put the needs of the sheep before their own needs. The weak, sick, lost, and displaced sheep must be nurtured, doctored, found, and restored. There are frequently threatening situations and challenges which must be solved. But, most importantly for the Christian leader, he or she must set the example by knowing God, listening to His voice, and following Him wholeheartedly. The leader who does these things will have his or her priorities in order and will not fall.

Sheep have a few responsibilities too. As we talked about earlier, as sheep, we need to know the Shepherd and His voice;

“Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?”

we need to follow the Shepherd; and we need to trust the Shepherd to know what is best for us. He has also given us earthly shepherds to lead us. We need to follow those God has put in authority over us, to respect and pray for them. In addition to rulers in the secular realm, as Christians, He has also given us shepherds in the church where He has planted us. The word “pastor” comes from the Latin word for “shepherd.” I grew up as the child of a clergyman. For a number of years, my father pastored a local church. It is a huge responsibility, requiring much more than the ability to preach or teach well. The job of a shepherd includes caring for, nurturing, protecting, and leading. God’s plan is for a relationship to be established between the shepherd and sheep that is evidenced by loyalty, relationship, and trust.

Today’s Shepherds

In today’s world, we often see leaders who look out for their own interests at the expense of their “sheep.” In the past couple of years, we have read much in the news of the excesses many top leaders have been guilty of, as we watched their business empires collapsing and dragging the economy down with them. They paid themselves huge bonuses while the workers floundered.

God expects a higher standard from leaders. Leaders are to be people of integrity who care deeply about the needs of their flock. Leaders need to take seriously the words of Yeshua who said the two greatest commandments were to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. Today, some leaders seem to love themselves more.

God told Ezekiel to prophesy against such leaders. *“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds, ‘Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings and you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost, but with force and cruelty you have ruled them’”* (Ezekiel 34:2-4).





Trusting Our Shepherd

Yes, today, we are living in difficult times. In my travels to various countries, I hear about rising unemployment and the difficulty in finding a job. The state of the economy is a deep concern to all. Wars and rumors of war threaten safety and terrorism can strike anywhere. Christians are talking more about the end times and the difficulties the Bible foretells for those times.

Now, more than ever, it is time to turn our eyes to the Shepherd. He knows what we need, and He takes His job seriously. He wants to lead us in the best paths for each of us. Like sheep in Israel, we may not enjoy beautiful green pastures, but even in the rocky, barren hilltops of our current situations, we can trust in our

Good Shepherd. In these times, we must learn total reliance on the Lord. Like the Children of Israel in the wilderness, we can trust in Him to provide even in the bleakest of circumstances, but only if we keep our eyes on Him.

Now is the time to commit to knowing Him, learning to hear His voice, and following His leading, not once a week in church, but moment by moment, day by day. Remember the words of the psalmist, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"* (Psalm 23:1).

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

Many pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding "yes"! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. *"For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem"* (Isaiah 2:3).

