

## **Portrait of Christ as the Good Shepherd**

A man who, like most of us, was not that familiar with sheep and shepherds was on a hiking vacation in another country when he saw a man driving sheep with a stick. He was rather horrified. The man was whacking them and yelling at them something awful. So, he went over to the man and said, “Sir, I don’t really know much about shepherding but I thought shepherds were supposed to lead their sheep.” The man said, “I’m not the shepherd. I’m the butcher.”<sup>1</sup>

We come today in our examination of the portraits of Christ in the Old Testament to the portrait of Christ as the Good Shepherd: The Good Shepherd. We need to take that phrase apart word by word. And we begin with the last word: shepherd. So, for all of us city dwellers...

### **I. What Is the Biblical Definition of a Shepherd?**

According to the Bible, herding sheep is at least 4,000 years old and possibly older. It’s mentioned in the oldest book of the Bible, which might not be the book of Genesis. Some evangelical scholars say that the book of Job is older. But whichever is the oldest, it doesn’t matter, since owning sheep and shepherding are mentioned in both. Which also means that many of the best-known personalities of the Old Testament spent significant time tending sheep. Men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, and Amos the prophet, as well as Rachel who married Jacob, were all shepherds at one point in their lives. And we know, of course, that shepherding was common in Jesus’ day as well.

But what were the duties of a shepherd? Well, shepherding was not easy nor was it for the faint of heart. The shepherds largely lived an outdoor life. If they were lucky, they got up at the crack of dawn, led the sheep out of the sheepfold, and brought them to where there was grass for food and water to drink. Then, they would bring them home at night to the safety of a pen.

But if they weren’t lucky, they did much more. Have you ever been to the Middle East? Grass and water are often hard to find. So, in the dry the season, shepherds led their sheep to grass and water, no matter how many miles away it was. In a nomadic culture, there were no fences or private property. There was just land. So, when a shepherd and his sheep were far from home, his responsibilities greatly increased. Now, he not only fed and watered them, he also had to protect them, retrieve them when they got lost, tend to their injuries or sicknesses, and even comfort them when they’d get spooked by a storm or the threat of a predator.<sup>2</sup> So, in summary, here’s the job description of a biblical shepherd:

1. He provided food and water for the sheep.
2. He protected the sheep from danger
3. He guided and led the sheep
4. He rescued the sheep when they got lost
5. He healed the wounds and sicknesses of the sheep
6. He comforted and soothed the sheep

So, to do this job right, what kind of focus did shepherds need to have – “self-focus” or “sheep-focus”? Yeah, to do it right, they needed to be “sheep-focused.” The word “sheep” is in every one of those six points of the job description. And this is why the title “shepherd” came to be used also for leaders in the Israeli society. The classic example is King David, who’d been a

shepherd as a boy and became the “Shepherd of Israel” as a man. Other kings of Israel were also called “shepherd.” And even God is praised as being a shepherd. In Ps. 23 David writes...

**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. (Ps. 23:1)**

And what does that mean? It means that for David, God fulfilled all six of the requirements of a biblical shepherd. He provided, protected, guided, rescued, tended his wounds and comforted and soothed him. That was David’s experience. Is it yours?

Before you answer that, let’s examine the next word. Moving backwards, we consider...

## **II. What Is the Biblical Definition of a Good Shepherd?**

To know what is good, you have to know what is bad. And when it comes to shepherding people, God was very clear about what was good and what was bad. We read that in the Ezekiel passage. This is describing what happened AFTER Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the citizens were taken captive. So, Jerusalem fell, its culture collapsed, and the cause was partially because of bad shepherding. Listen... (Ezek. 34:1-6)

**The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.**

Do you see what God is doing? He’s going right down the checklist of proper Spiritual Shepherding and he finds nothing but failure! The priests didn’t feed, protect, guide, rescue, heal or comfort. Instead, they just focused on themselves.

Now, it wasn’t just the priest’s fault that their culture collapsed. Read Jeremiah. God said through that prophet to His people:

**... “What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?” (Jer. 2:5b)**

So, it was both people and priests who abandoned God. And that brought about the natural consequences of their choices and actions. Without godly shepherds, the sheep were scattered and became lost. Like the prodigal son who was out from under the protective canopy of his father’s house, they became easy prey for the spiritual predators; so, they were injured, became sick, then despondent, and it all just spiraled off the tracks. What a mess.

Now, was any of this God’s fault? No! So, did He have any responsibility to help them? NO! Which makes what happened next all the more amazing. What did God do? He says to the priests, “Step aside. I’ll do your job.” The people and priests were all taken captive to another country that had no Temple and without the Temple, the priests literally had no ceremonial work to do, only “people work,” only shepherding. In Babylon, the Jews were allowed to live together as a community. And Ezekiel the prophet, who, by the way, was also a priest, was used by God there to retrain these “self-focused” priests to make them “sheep-focused” again. Listen to God’s instructions:

**“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.”** (Ezek. 34:11-12, 15-16)

So, the disintegration of Israel’s society was actually the tool God used to reform it. Has God ever done anything like that in your life? You thought, “Where is He? Doesn’t He care? But actually, God was “shepherding” you. The hard experience was actually God caring for you.

Modern shepherds in the U.K. take certain preventative measures to keep their sheep healthy. For example, they take each sheep and ram and dip it in a huge trough filled with an antiseptic solution. The shepherd has to completely submerge each animal, holding its ears, eyes, and nose under the surface of the liquid. This is, of course, terrifying for the sheep. In fact, the shepherd has his dogs surrounding the trough to bark and snap at any sheep that tries to get out.

But as terrifying an experience as that is for the sheep, without this periodic treatment, they would become the victims of parasites and disease. So, that terrifying experience is a huge benefit for each sheep.

A Christian writer who witnessed this whole operation said she couldn’t help but remember, while watching this, that Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd. She wrote:

*I’ve had some experiences in my life [where] ... I couldn’t figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from the Shepherd I trusted. And he didn’t give me a hint of explanation. As I watched the struggling sheep I thought, “If only there were some way to explain it to them. But ‘such knowledge is too wonderful for me/them – it is high, I/they cannot attain it.’”* (Ps. 139:6)<sup>3</sup>

In the Old Testament, there are portraits of good shepherds, and bad shepherds. Please notice that in this Ezekiel passage, the bad shepherds are plural but the good shepherd is singular.

**“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD.”** (Ezek. 34:15)

When Jesus came into our world, He came not just to be “a” shepherd but to be the “GOOD” Shepherd. Lastly, we need to understand that ...

### **III. Jesus Is THE Good Shepherd**

Ezekiel chapter 34 is a fascinating chapter because it not only predicted a rescue and reformation for Israel after the Babylonian captivity but it promised an eventual rescue and reformation available to everyone. Verses 23 and 24 introduce this ... (Ezek. 34:23-24)

**“And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.”**

Who is this “one shepherd”? It’s ‘THE’ good Shepherd. The definite article means He’s one of a kind. He’s “*my servant David.*” This is a reference to the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ. It can’t be King David; he died 400 years earlier. No, this is a clear portrait of Jesus. Jesus is claiming in John 10 that He is THE one and only good Shepherd! (John 10:11-15)

**“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters**

**them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”**

Three times Jesus uses the title, ‘The Good Shepherd.’ He’s making a distinction between Himself and any other shepherd. In previous verses He says there are others who will come and try to get the sheep to follow them, but they are “*thieves and robbers.*” Thieves and robbers don’t have the same intentions as THE good shepherd. In fact, they’re the butchers.

So, how’s your life going these days? Is your soul finding green pastures? Are you feeling safe or threatened? Is someone tending to your wound? Are you sleeping well or with one eye open? Are you hangin’ with THE good shepherd or did you find yourself a discount shepherd? So, which shepherd are you following? Or are you going solo because you don’t think you even need a shepherd?

Ps. 23 was written by King David. If anyone could’ve thought he didn’t need a shepherd, it would’ve been the king, right? But David felt just the opposite. He openly said, “The Lord is my shepherd.” But what would his Psalm sound like if “the Shepherd” were removed? Listen to This “shepherd-less” Ps. 23:

Verse 1 - my ... I shall ... want

Verse 2 - me ... me

Verse 3 - my soul ... me

Verse 4 - I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I ... fear ... me ... me.

Verse 5 – me in the presence of my enemies ... my head ... my cup

Verse 6 – me all the days of my life ... I will dwell

Without the Good Shepherd, all that’s left is me, me, me; my wants, fear of death, and the constant reminder of my enemies. Which Psalm 23 is closer to your life experience right now – the one with THE shepherd or the one that’s shepherd-less?

The prophet Micah prophesied that a unique Shepherd one day would come:

**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose coming forth is from of old,  
from ancient days ...**

**And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,  
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.**

**And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth.**

**And he shall be their peace. ... (Micah 5:2, 4, 5)**

Only THIS Shepherd has the strength of the LORD to give you peace.

So maybe you’re thinking, “Okay, yes, I need the Good Shepherd. But how can I know He’ll feed, protect, guide, rescue, heal, and comfort me?” You’ll know by faith. **2 Cor.5:7:**

**... for we walk by faith, not by sight.**

You say, “Yes, but how do I do that? What does walking by faith look like?”

A pastor met a music professor who told him of a young pianist in his program who was working on his doctor’s degree in performance. According to the professor, the young man had abilities that left his peers in the dust. “If you heard him in concert,” the professor said, “you’d

be amazed at his mastery.” “But,” he continued, “if you knew his whole story, you’d see something even more incredible.”

You see, this pianist has limited hearing. He’s able to hear the notes in the lower register of the piano, but as the notes get higher, they become dimmer to his ear. So, there are sections in the upper register of the keyboard that he can’t hear at all. If he chose to play only the part of the piano that he can hear, you’d still say he was a great pianist. But then, he wouldn’t be able to play the music of the masters.

So, how does he overcome this disability? He plays by faith. He follows the written score carefully, but since he can’t hear if he’s played the upper register properly, he relies on his instructor to tell him how he’s doing. And by fully trusting his instructor, he has developed a faith to play the notes that are silent to him. <sup>4</sup>

God’s plan for our life is like a written music score. But some of the keys on your keyboard don’t seem to register a sound when you hit them. Don’t trust your ear. Trust the Good Shepherd. He’s sent the Holy Instructor to let you know if you’re hitting the right notes. Play your music by faith. Jesus said: (John 10:14)

**“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me ...”**

Play by faith and you’ll know the joy of the Master’s music. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hodgin, *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), p. 238

<sup>2</sup> By the way, I say “his” sheep, because the women shepherdesses were only local. There are no examples in Israel of women fulfilling the expanded tasks of a “nomadic,” away from home shepherd. In the story of when Moses met his wife Zipporah (Ex. 2:17-22), she and her six sisters were being prevented from even getting water for their sheep. Moses rescued them from the Egyptian shepherds. Women would never be sent alone into the wilderness of ancient Israel with a flock of sheep overnight.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Suffering* (New York: Dutton Adult, 2013), pp. 261-262

<sup>4</sup>Sermon Central, “Faith to Play the Silent Notes,” Bradley Berglund, Feb. 14, 2009