

The Long and Winding Road Jesus the Good Shepherd

2018 was a different year for the Lanier household. We have had sheep for a good many years, but in 2018, we had a granddaughter who enjoyed seeing the sheep! That made for a different Spring because as the baby lambs were born, we got to see them through a child's eyes. We were a lot more attentive.

We aren't exactly sheep barons. We came into 2018 with only 17 sheep. But in the Spring, we had 15 baby lambs born. (At least we think it was 15. Every time we would count the sheep, we would fall asleep.)

One fateful Saturday, we decided to move the sheep from their smallish sheep pen to a fenced area with a lot of grass for grazing. Not being shepherds by training or experience, it was quite the challenge. We didn't have a sheep dog, but our very small three-pound Havanese dog Tizzy, pretended to be an Australian Shepherd and came along to help!

The chore should have taken about 20 minutes. Two hours later, we were just finishing. I grew in my respect for shepherds! During the day, I kept ruminating on the 23d Psalm. Every action of the sheep, I could allegorize to my life before God. I also saw how important the shepherd is to the sheep. (And how the sheep can often ignore the shepherd who is trying to do what is best for the sheep.)

Ancient Israel was a flock laden society filled with shepherds and sheep. Not surprisingly, the metaphor of sheep was seized upon by God to teach Israel. Over and over in the prophets and other Scriptures, we read about God as a shepherd and the people as sheep. These prophetic teachings find an ultimate meaning and fulfillment in the teachings of Jesus when he explained to his followers that he (Jesus) was the Good Shepherd. Those Old Testament allusions and metaphors of God as a shepherd were preludes to an understanding of the role Jesus would play in the lives of his followers.

Jesus the Good Shepherd

Jesus drew upon a common reality in the lives of the Jews in his day when he spoke of his role as a shepherd. The reality was found not only in the culture of the day, where shepherds were commonplace, but also in the Jewish Scriptures, which used the shepherd motif often. Those passages provide a foundation for understanding the role Jesus would take with his people.

Ezekiel 34:1-16

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. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; ⁶ 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... “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. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. 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.

In Jesus’ day, the Jewish people knew there were different kinds of shepherds. Jesus was specific in John 10:11 that he was a “good shepherd.” This set Jesus into a framework prophetically written about in Ezekiel 34.

In Ezekiel 34, we read of the sheep analogy for the people of God a common analogy going back to Moses. In Numbers 27:12-23, we read about the exodus ending. Moses knew he would not be going with the Israelites into the Promised Land. Before the people left Moses, Moses asked God to appoint another leader. Moses did not want the people “as sheep that have no shepherd” (Num. 27:17). So, God appointed Joshua to continue as shepherd for the people.

The people continued to have “shepherds,” but not all of them were of Joshua’s level. Ezekiel 34 noted that the leaders at the time were dismal shepherds, living off their sheep to their own advantage, with no regard to the true value of the sheep.

We can read the negatives of what the poor shepherds did and from that draw positive differences of what Jesus does as the good shepherd. The poor shepherds fed themselves

off of the sheep, and used the sheep for clothing, while a good shepherd sees that the sheep are fed. In like manner, Jesus doesn't use his people to satisfy Jesus' needs. Jesus spends his life satisfying the needs of his people.

The poor shepherds ignored the weak sheep while a good shepherd would work to strengthen the weak. Jesus as a good shepherd came to the weak to build them up and make them strong. The poor shepherds left the sick sheep to either get well on their own or to die, while good shepherds sought to heal the sick sheep. Jesus came to heal his people. Jesus healed them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Jesus healed them in their relationship with God. Jesus was the great physician to his sheep.

The poor shepherds would not care if their sheep strayed, wandered away, or got lost. While a good shepherd monitored the sheep, sought out those missing, and protected the flock. Jesus came as a good shepherd seeking to protect and keep those sheep under his care. As Jesus proclaimed in his high priestly prayer right before his betrayal,

While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled (Jn. 17:12).

In Ezekiel, God claims the role of a shepherd as those who were to shepherd Israel failed in their responsibility. God explained through the prophet that God would come down to earth, seek out his sheep from all lands, unite them as one people, and feed them, providing nurturing care. God will do those things that had been lacking. He will seek the lost, bring back the stray, heal the injured, strengthen the weak, and "feed" them justice. God will work justice in and for his people. This was the work God did through Jesus. Jesus is the source of healing, the uniting of all people from all lands who become one in him. Jesus brings God's justice into our lives in a way that brings us justly into God's presence.

Isaiah 40:9-40:11

Another very direct prophetic promise exploring the role of God/Jesus as a shepherd is contained in Isaiah 40:9-11. Isaiah 40 is a powerful Messianic chapter that the Jews of Jesus' day understood was referencing the Messiah. It speaks of a time where God would pardon the sins of Israel (Is. 40:1-2). It referenced the role of John the Baptist as a proclamation that a "voice crying in the wilderness" would "prepare the way of the Lord" (Is. 40:3). Then every valley will be lifted up, every mountain brought low, and "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed" (Is. 40:4).

The prophet then calls upon the "herald of good news" to ascend a high mountain to proclaim to all the people that God is coming! We are remiss if we fail to see that the "herald of good news" in the Septuagint (the Greek translation available in the centuries

before Jesus) of Isaiah 40 uses the word “gospel” (*euangelizmō* – εὐαγγελίζω), a word describing the work of Jesus by Paul and the apostles.

In this Messianic framework, we read,

Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”
Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young (Is. 40:9-11).

This is Jesus, the good shepherd. In Jesus, God comes with “might.” Jesus brings God’s “reward.” Jesus takes care of and “tends his flock” in love. Jesus gathers his children like lambs, carrying them as needed and gently leads his followers.

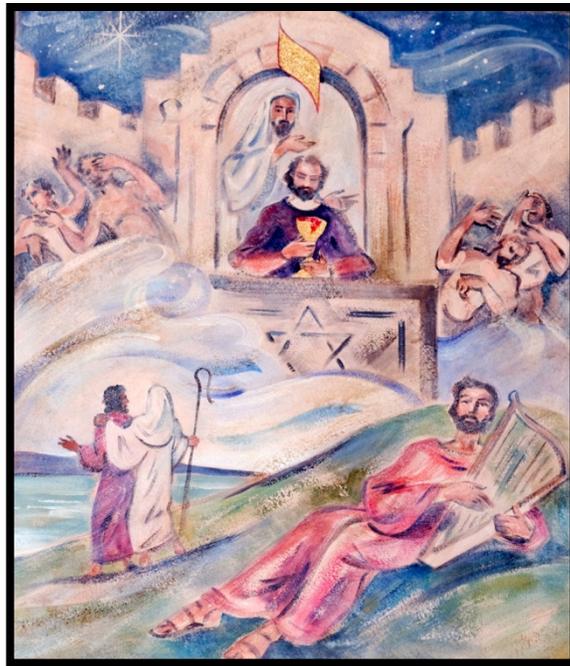
Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me*

*all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.*

I suspect the 23d Psalm is the most well-known of all the Psalms. It might even be the most quoted passage from the Bible, at least in funerals. The popularity of the Psalm isn't a recent fad or phenomena. It has always been a favorite, and it was undoubtedly in the day of Jesus as well.

This Psalm exemplifies the teaching of Jesus where he proclaimed himself the "good shepherd." In the Psalm, we get a picture of how Jesus is the good Shepherd to his flock, his people. The Psalms serves as a marvelous insight into Jesus' proclamation, "I am the good Shepherd" (Jn. 10:11).



I love the idea of being a sheep in the flock of the Lord. Good shepherds spend their time and energy on their sheep. They are there when the sheep are born, and they know the sheep well from then on. The sheep thrive in the protection and provision of the shepherd. In this sense, Jesus the good Shephard should give us comfort.

The psalmist says that the Lord “*makes me lie down in green pastures.*” It is only one Hebrew word that is translated here as “makes me lie down.” The verb is “lie down,” but here it is written in a special Hebrew construction (called the “*hiphil*”) that makes the verb “causative.” That is why it is translated “*makes*” me lie down. God *causes* me to lie down in green pastures. It is not something I would do on my own!

Left to my own devices, I would lie down amidst the thorns and thistles, convinced that was going to be the fun spot. I have seen many beguiled by the sinful traps of this world, walking into them willingly, even eagerly, seduced by the promises of this world. Without fail, those sins turn out to be the very opposite of where any right-thinking person would want to be. That is where I would be without a Lord who shepherds me, *making me* lie down in green pastures.

This is the God who restores my soul. This is the God of righteousness who leads me in those paths of his righteousness. This is my Good Shepherd.

Not surprisingly, Jesus owned the analogy of the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11*ff*). Jesus reinforced not only knowing his sheep, but his sheep knowing him. John places a pun in this teaching with Jesus, as Good Shepherd, “laying down” his life for his sheep. Our God, not only makes us lie down in green pastures, but he also lays himself down sacrificially for us, thereby enabling our green pastures eternally!

Psalm 80:1-2

*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,
stir up your might
and come to save us!*

Psalm 80 shows another view and usage of the idea of God as our shepherd. In this passage we see the role of God/Jesus as shepherd in our prayers. Here the psalmist prays to God as the shepherd, seeking the shepherd’s care in times of trouble.

This is the option of believers before the Lord. We can pray to God as his sheep. We can tell him of our problems and concerns and be confident he hears us and seeks to aid us. He is not an absent or uncaring shepherd. He is a devoted and caring shepherd, attentive to our cries.

Psalm 95:6-9

*Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your fathers put me to the test
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.*

In Psalm 95, we see another focus that is important as we see Jesus fulfilling the role of God, the good Shepherd set forth in Old Testament writings. Here we see that with Jesus/God as a good shepherd, it should have implications on how we as sheep live.

We should bow down and give reverence and worship to God. We are not sheep that are wildlings, living in the wilderness on our own. We have a caretaker whom we follow obediently. We should be listening for his voice and following him, in faith that he leads us where we should go. Confident that he will nurture and provide for us. We shouldn't be rebellious sheep who go astray and seek after our own way, disregarding the Lord our shepherd.

Psalm 100:3

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!
Serve the LORD with gladness!
Come into his presence with singing!
Know that the LORD, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!*

There is great cause for rejoicing understanding the Lord is our shepherd. His ownership is something we should be proud of and excited about. It should bring forth songs of joy and excitement. We can rest – truly rest—knowing God is watching over us with a shepherd's heart. God is caring about us. God is attentive to our needs. This should bring forth our responsive joy and appreciation. Praise God, the Good Shepherd!