

The Good Shepherd

[Part 3]

Psalms 23:3 [NIV] “... *He restores my soul ...*”

It is often assumed that anyone who places themselves in the care of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, could never become so distressed as to need restoration.

Yet every human being can become cast down and dejected at times.

Psalms 42:11 [NIV] “*Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? ...*”

This is but one of many similar statements of deep distress that are to be found in the psalms, many of them expressing the thoughts of King David, a man who was very near to his Creator God. [Acts 13:22]

There is an exact parallel in the lives of sheep.

A cast down sheep is a very pathetic sight, lying on its back, its feet in the air, it flays away frantically, struggling to stand up, without success.

Sometimes it will bleat a little for help, but generally it lies there lashing about in fright and frustration. It can be close to death (gasses can build up in the rumen, and as these expand they can cut the blood circulation to the extremities of the body.) In hot weather a sheep can die within a few hours, and is vulnerable to attack from predators.

1 Corinthians 10:12 [NIV] “*So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!*”

Understand what can cause a sheep to become cast down?

Then let us relate them to the Christian life and learn from them.

a) Sheep like to choose a soft and comfortable spot to lie down such as a soft rounded hollow. In such a situation they can easily roll over onto their back.

In our Christian lives we often seek to take the line of least resistance that demands no self-discipline.

In such a situation it is easy to find ourselves spiritually depressed.

b) A sheep with too much wool on their back, making them literally top heavy, can easily find themselves cast down.

As Christians if we are weighed down with too many possessions and cares of this world, we can so easily be distracted from seeking to grow spiritually and fail to produce the spiritual fruits needed if we are to become a created child of God. [Matthew 13:22]

c) A sheep that is too fat can easily become cast down.

Revelation 3:17 [NIV] “*You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.*”

These Christians who considered themselves wealthy and not needing anything were in great spiritual danger and needed to examine their lives.

Material wealth is no measure of spiritual health.

Hebrews 12:6-11 [NIV] *“because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*

Ask God to discipline us so that we can recognise our spiritual state.

1 Corinthians 10:13 [NIV] *“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”*

We can be sure that the discipline we receive from our Creator will **not** be more than we can bear.

Psalms 23:3 [NIV] *“... He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.”*

Just like so many human beings, sheep are notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves they will follow the same trails until they become ruts, graze the same hillsides until they are turned into desert wastes, pollute their own ground until it is corrupt with disease and parasites. Many of the world’s finest sheep ranges have been ruined beyond repair by over-grazing, poor management and indifferent or ignorant sheep owners. The greatest safeguard which a shepherd has in handling his flock is to keep them on the move, never to stay on the same ground for too long.

Isaiah 53:6 [NIV] *“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way ...”*

There is something terrifying about the destructive self-determination within a human being, that is linked with pride and self-assertion.

Proverbs 14:12 [NIV] *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.”*

Very true of every human being.

Repeated in **Proverbs 16:25** in case we didn’t respond to this wisdom at first reading.

In total contrast –

John 10:7-10 [NIV] *“Therefore Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”*

If we turn our back on our own way of living and follow our Good Shepherd we will be greatly blessed.

Mark 8:34-35 [NIV] *“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”*

To take up our cross means to reject our old way of thinking and acting and to follow the example of our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ.

We need to ask ourselves certain questions to see if we really are following the Good Shepherd.

- a) Do we love Jesus Christ more than any other being? [**Luke 14:26-27, 33**]
- b) Are we willing to be set apart from other people because of our dedication to our Saviour Jesus Christ?
- c) Instead of insisting on our “rights” am I willing to forego them in order to serve other human beings?
- d) Instead of being the most important am I willing to be the one who works for my Saviour unnoticed by most people?
- e) Do I accept every circumstance of life in an attitude of gratitude?
- f) Am I willing to follow the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, simply to do what He asks without question or doubt?

These are tough questions but ones we have to answer honestly.

Philippines 2:13 [NIV] *“for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”*

This is where we find the strength to follow the Good Shepherd and be able to answer “yes” to the above questions, as the power of the Holy Spirit actively works in us.

Psalms 23:4 [NIV] *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ...”*

In most places where sheep are kept there is a division of the year, the summer is spent on the “alpine” meadows, situated high up on the hills. During such time the shepherd is in intimate contact with the sheep day and night.

There is only one practical way to these high hill pastures, that is through a valley.

Christians soon discover that it is in the valleys of our lives that we find a closer contact with our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Lives of deep shadows and only short periods of sunlight, sudden storms and a constant rocky path.

How do we respond to such a journey in life?

Psalms 23:4 [NIV] *“... I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me.”*

The rod and staff are the main tools a shepherd has.

The rod, Hebrew “*shêbet*” is a stick used by the shepherd to apply gentle pressure on the side of the head of the sheep to make it change direction. Also used as a weapon against any wild animal that may attack the flock. Literally the rod was an extension of the arm of the shepherd.

The spiritual rod of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, is the written Word of God, the Christian Bible.

2 Timothy 3:15-17 [NIV] *“and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

Scripture, the Christian Bible, works in many ways, it reveals our Creator God but it also reveals our own sinful nature. Scripture guides us in the right direction in life and reveals the gentle care of our Good Shepherd. The promises we find in the Christian Bible strengthen us in times of trials.

The Good Shepherd's rod also examines us.

Ezekiel 20:37 [NIV] *"I will take note of you as you pass under my rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant."*

Shepherd will use the rod to examine the sheep including the parting of the wool to see any infection or parasite.

Psalms 139:23-24 [NIV] *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."*

David knew that this was part of the Good Shepherd's management of his life.

Hebrews 4:12-13 [NIV] *"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*

God's Word reveals our very thoughts and motives, thus is a good defence against the evil influence of Satan and his demons.

Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, used the scriptures as a defence and attack against Satan. [**Matthew 4:1-10**]

The staff –

This is symbolic of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The staff [or crook in modern language] was a long stick with a curved hook on the end, used in many ways in the shepherd's day-to-day dealing with his sheep.

There are areas of good sheep management in which the staff plays a most significant role. The first is to draw the sheep and shepherd together in an intimate relationship.

The shepherd will use his staff to gently lift a newborn lamb and bring it to its mother if they become separated. The shepherd does this because he does **not** wish the ewe to reject her offspring if it bears odour of his hands on it.

The staff is used by the shepherd to reach out and catch an individual sheep, young or old, to draw them close to himself for intimate examination. The staff is very useful this way for any shy and timid sheep that normally tend to keep at a distance from the shepherd. Sometimes the shepherd will actually hold his staff against the side of his favourite sheep, simply so that they are in touch, almost as if walking hand in hand.

The Holy Spirit is called "*the Comforter*" the Greek means one who walks beside you. [**John 16:7**]

A Christian life is not just one of subscribing to certain doctrines and religious practices.

A Christian life is a child walking, conversing and following the example of their father or a sheep following the directions of its shepherd.

Christians often, like stubborn sheep, get ourselves into ridiculous and dangerous positions in life, it is then that with the help of His staff, the Holy Spirit, that is the Good Shepherd, will save us from such dilemmas.

Psalms 23:5 [NIV] *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies ..."*

The Hebrew word translated "*table*" is "*shulehân*" literally "*spread out*" referring to a fine meal.

In the context of sheep management it means preparing pastures for the sheep.

A good shepherd will early in the year make a trip to the high pastures to be used during the summer months and clear any poisonous weeds, clear out leaves from pools of water or brushwood from springs. He would take note of any signs of predators who may endanger his sheep when they arrive.

The parallel in Christian living is very clear.

Like sheep, especially lambs, humans like to try everything that comes our way so we need to be protected from what will harm us.

An example of the great care of the Good Shepherd is found in **Luke 22:31**. Jesus Christ knew that Satan would attack Peter and had prayed that his faith would not fail him, that Peter would allow the Holy Spirit to develop the fruit of faithfulness in him. [**Galatians 5:22**]

Hebrews 4:13-16 [NIV] *“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”*

Jesus Christ as the Son of Man has personally experienced all the dangers and temptations that we may face as Satan attacks us.

We need to constantly thank God that He has prepared for each of us all we need to avoid those situations that would harm us spiritually.