

The Amazing Love of the Good Shepherd

'The Lord is my shepherd' is a favourite hymn for many people. It is based on Psalm 23, which was penned by King David, and is especially meaningful as he was originally a shepherd himself.

However, our modern way of life prevents us from fully understanding these words. While there is at least one shepherd who reads this magazine, most of us are unfamiliar with shepherding and we are even less knowledgeable about what it was like in Bible times.

The Life of a Shepherd

There is a shepherd in the English Lake District who writes about his work. The methods he uses are thousands of years old, and so are similar to those described in the Bible. Here are some of the points he makes:

- ❖ Despite its romantic image, shepherding is very hard work.
- ❖ The routine is determined totally by the needs of the sheep.
- ❖ Some activities – like shearing – are financially loss-making but beneficial for the sheep.
- ❖ The shepherd finds conditions in which the sheep will thrive.
- ❖ He goes out in all weather conditions, risking his own safety, to protect them.
- ❖ He is especially vigilant when they are lambing, and in caring for lambs or orphans.

- ❖ He knows ewes and lambs individually by their characteristics.
- ❖ He bought a ram against the advice of his fellow-shepherds because, he saw the potential and benefit to his flock.

Shepherds in Bible Times

In the days of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) shepherding was important work, but later it became a menial job for the working class. It was certainly not easy. Shepherds spent a lot of time outside watching their sheep and protecting them from weather, wild animals or thieves. They made sheepfolds to protect the sheep and ensured that the entrance was guarded. They regularly counted their flock and it was, and still is, common for the shepherds to have names for individual sheep.





Shepherds had to make sure that the sheep had enough food. At certain times of the year in Israel this was not easy, as the sun scorched the land and there was little green grass. It was also important to locate suitable watering places such as pools or wells, where the sheep could drink without fear. This also appears in the Psalm:

He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters (Psalm 23:2).

The shepherd would not take his flock to new pastures until he was sure they were all present, and in the Middle East he always led them rather than driving them in front of him.

When several flocks were being separated the sheep recognised the voice and distinctive call of their shepherd. Such was the dedication of shepherds. Unlike modern western shepherds, they worked alone without tractors or a sheepdog, however difficult or dangerous the situation.

The Divine Shepherd

These descriptions are very poignant when we read the Bible, and see them

practised by the Jewish shepherds. More importantly God describes His people as sheep so teaches us about Himself.

He criticises Israel's false leaders for misleading them and not protecting them spiritually (look at Ezekiel 34:1-16). In contrast, He promises to look after His sheep Himself. The prophet Isaiah also promised that there would be a faithful and dedicated shepherd for Israel:

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 40:11).

The Good Shepherd

Jesus said that he was the good shepherd, who made the ultimate sacrifice for his sheep.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know my sheep, and am known by my own. As the Father knows me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:11-15).

He also described the response of his true flock.

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. 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 (John 10:1-4).

The good shepherd had a dedication to and passion for his sheep. Jesus was provided by God to be this caring, reliable leader.

Against this background we can never, ever, say that God does not care about us. He has done absolutely everything to offer us salvation:

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10).

Despite the efforts of the most conscientious shepherd, some sheep do die, especially when they wander away from the rest of the flock. Similarly, if we do not obey the Shepherd's voice we put ourselves in eternal peril. Let us remember what the Shepherd has done, and still offers to do, for us and resolve to listen to him and to follow him.

Anna Hart

If you want to access back numbers of "Glad Tidings" you can find copies for the last few years on our website:
www.gladtidingsmagazine.org

