

During my recent ministry trip to Ethiopia, I was surprised by the large numbers of cattle and sheep in that part of the world. Never have I seen so many shepherds and so much livestock. We traveled the length of the country and they were literally everywhere—in the streets, in the fields, in the cities, everywhere you looked shepherds were leading their herds and flocks to find grazing, water or safe shelter.

I found it easy to distinguish between the flocks tended by *good shepherds* and those tended by *hirelings*. Some flocks were led while others had to be driven; some were healthy while others were sickly; some had been groomed and cared for while others had matted fleeces or hair and had obviously been neglected; some were being closely watched while others were apparently left to wander on their own with no protection from predators and thieves.

As a cattleman who has always moved and handled my cattle by calling them, I watched with pleasure as an obviously good shepherd led his flock down a busy and crowded roadway—all mixed in with the flocks of many others. When the shepherd turned and went a different direction, he simply called out. His livestock heard his voice, they distinguished it from all the other voices and sounds in the crowd, and turned and followed their own shepherd. They had obviously spent enough time with their shepherd to know his voice and had followed him enough to know that they could trust him to meet all their needs.

These sights immediately sent my mind back to Jesus' teachings about sheep, His statement and the evidences that prove He is the Good Shepherd, and to the lessons of the 23rd Psalms—more specifically to a book that I had read written by Phillip W. Keller and published by Zondervan Publishing House entitled [A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23](#). This is a book that I recommend to everyone and have read several times through the years, every time learning more and more about myself and my Good Shepherd.

Jesus made a clear distinction between the “good shepherd” and the “hired hand” in John 10:11-13: *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.”* (NIV). Though most people in America today are far removed from farm life and may not be able to relate to all that Jesus was saying, unless they do further study or read a book such as Keller's, the audience who heard Jesus speak knew exactly what He was saying. They also fully understood the deep implications and truths of the 23rd Psalm.

King David, the author of this Psalm, was himself a shepherd and the son of a shepherd. He also proved himself to be a “Good Shepherd” when he risked his own life to save the lives of his sheep (1 Sam 17:34-37). I make this point to show that even though David had proven himself to be a good shepherd, he wrote this Psalm from the perspective of a sheep that was proud to belong to, and come under the care of, THE Good Shepherd.

Look at the pride with which David began the Psalm; “The Lord is MY shepherd, I shall not be in want.” David knew the characteristics of a good shepherd and the

security and contentment that one enjoyed under His care. David also knew of God's faithfulness, grace, mercy, provision, and long suffering in a personal way. Even though David had experienced difficulties, failures and hardships in his life, His Shepherd God was faithful to meet all his needs and would never leave him or forsake him. (Phil. 4:19, Deut. 31:8).

"He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters, he restores my soul." Experienced shepherds know that for sheep on the open range to 'be made to lie down', their needs must be met and they must be free from all anxiety. In many places, as in Ethiopia, a lot of hard work goes into preparing grazing areas and sources of still, clean water—it doesn't just happen. A good shepherd would never lead his flock to a place he had not already been and made preparations for their welfare, knowing the grazing was adequate and free of noxious plants, and knowing the water was plentiful, clean, and safe. David knew that only the diligent Shepherd Himself could meet his needs and give him peace.

If you have ever been around sheep, you know that they can easily become "cast". A cast sheep is one that has rolled over on his back, unable to get up on his own. This happens most often with sheep that have a heavy fleece or are overweight, but can happen to any of them. Once cast, gases build up in the rumen, blood flow is cut off from the legs, and if not soon rescued the sheep will surely die. Every morning and evening, the shepherd counts and inspects his sheep to insure they are all up and moving. If not, he immediately and earnestly searches for the missing sheep until he finds it, lest it dies in its cast condition.

Christians are also prone to becoming cast. Even David knew what it was to be cast down and dejected when he failed God and gave in to temptation. He experienced the feelings of emptiness and hopelessness, being unable to help or save himself. He also experienced God's grace and mercy as his soul was restored.

Many people believe that when a Christian falls and finds himself cast, that God becomes disgusted and gives up on them—when instead, as our Shepherd, He earnestly searches for the lost sheep who is cast and separated from the flock so that He can rescue and restore them. To quote from Keller's book: "Jesus has the same sensation of anxiety, concern and compassion for cast men and women as a good shepherd has for his sheep. This is precisely why He looked on people with such pathos and compassion. It explains His magnanimous dealing with down-and-out individuals for whom even human society had no use. It reveals why He wept over those who spurned His affection. It discloses the depth of His understanding of undone people to whom He came eagerly and quickly, ready to help, to save, to restore. When I read the life story of Jesus Christ and examine carefully His conduct in coping with human need, I see Him again and again as the Good Shepherd picking up "cast" sheep. The tenderness, the love, the patience that He used to restore Peter's soul after the terrible tragedy of his temptations is a classic picture of the Christ coming to restore one of His own."

He is the Good Shepherd. Rest, knowing that He knows what He is doing with your life.