

The Good Shepherd Leads the Way

If you read last month's devotional, you noticed that we began exploring the 23rd Psalm from the perspective of true shepherds. David, who wrote the Psalm, was himself a good shepherd and the son of a good shepherd. Phillip W. Keller who authored the book that I reference entitled *A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23*, was also a successful and good shepherd. And of course, Jesus Himself is and always will be The Good Shepherd who we can trust with our lives. If you missed last month's devotional on verses 1-3a, you can still read it on the Cattle for Christ International website: www.cattleforchrist.com, under the tab of monthly devotionals.

Vs 3b: "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." It is no wonder that in Scripture, people are so often compared to sheep, even by Jesus. Sheep are known for being stubborn creatures of habit, who when left on their own, will not only devastate the land that sustains them, but also destroy themselves and others. They overgraze the best pastures destroying the root systems and the possibility of future provision. They daily walk the same familiar parasite infested and predator ridden paths, further exposing themselves to destruction. All of this was evident in the places I visited in Ethiopia earlier this year. Most of this country, because of overstocking, overgrazing, and unsound agricultural practices will never produce the lush pastures it once did, will never again meet the needs of the sheep or the shepherds.

How often we humans, like sheep, make the same mistakes of clinging to the same habits, the same lifestyles, the same mistakes that we have seen ruin the lives of others. We prefer to follow our own ways instead of being led by the Good Shepherd. We don't want to follow—it is somehow against our nature. Instead, we assert our own ideas, what we think is best for us, we neglect or reject the Word of God and we miss out on God's best for our lives. Proverbs 14:12 says: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." In contrast, Jesus says in John 14:6 "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Just like the sheep that are left to their own devices, instead of following the Good Shepherd who loves us and knows what is best for us, we find ourselves going our own ways, living derelict lives, in broken homes, with broken hearts, in a sickened society, dead in our sin, and with little hope for a brighter tomorrow.

Jesus will lead us in the paths of righteousness, but that doesn't mean that we have to follow. Each of us can choose to go our own way or to follow the One who knows what is best for us, who has already gone before us and who has prepared a way for us that is safe and meets all of our needs. To follow the Good Shepherd is a choice that we each have to make—a choice that simply means I choose to do what He tells me to do through His Word and through the leadership of His Holy Spirit: I will do what He asks me to do. I will go where He tells me to go. I will say what He tells me to say and I will live as He instructs me to live. Through this choice to obediently follow Him, He will accomplish in our lives what is best for us, He will accomplish what is best for others, our lives will honor Christ and His reputation, and He will lead us safely home. In other words, our lives will make Him look good and will draw others to repentance and faith in Him.

Vs 4: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me". In this part of the Psalm the conversation shifts to a more personal level. The sheep now addresses the Shepherd personally using the pronouns "I" and "You" (or "Thou" in the KJV), indicating a very personal, affectionate, loving and intimate relationship between the sheep and the Good Shepherd.

Most every Christian has experienced both what are referred to as "mountain top" and "valley" experiences in our walk with Christ, and we prefer to stay on the mountain tops because the valleys are often dry, lonely, and scary times in our lives. We hear the expression "moving

on to higher ground with God” and we somehow think that we can just take a ride in a hot air balloon or a ski lift and get there without having to go through the valley experiences. However, in life, the valleys experiences are many and are absolutely necessary to reach the higher ground. They are also critical to our growth, survival and spiritual maturity. Every mountain has its valleys, complete with deep ravines, drop offs, draws, predators and all the dangers that go with them. However, the Good Shepherd has been there before preparing the way for us, and He will lead us safely “through” the valleys if we just follow Him. We cannot stop there and we will not die there, but we must past through these valleys to get to higher ground and to more abundant, healthy, and productive lives.

Valleys can be dangerous, scary and treacherous places, but they are also most often where the water and the grazing are the freshest, the most abundant, and the most nourishing. In sheep country, the times of the year that a good shepherd leads his flock through the valleys going to the higher ground and best summer pastures are when the ewes are nursing the baby lambs and when they most need the abundant waters and lush grazing that can only be found in the valleys during that time of the year. The valley is also the way the sheep must pass to go home at the end of the season before winter sets in on the mountaintop ranges.

One day we all pass through the final valley of the shadow of death. The Good Shepherd will be with us to lead us. This is not something to be scared of for the Christian, instead, it is the path to home where there are no more dangers, no more storms to endure, no more attacks by the predators, no more hardships—but safely at home forever with the Good Shepherd who has faithfully led us, provided for us, protected us, cared for us, and loved us. We will be safely home with the Good Shepherd, but we will also be there with all the saints from every nation and tongue who have followed Him.

When we pass through this final valley, the “valley of the shadow of death”, we will really be at home—in a way that we have never been at home before. We will experience life as we have never experienced it before. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who loves you. Follow Him!