

The Good Shepherd

John 10:11-21

When we think about good shepherds in the Bible the first name that comes to mind is David. He wrote the 23rd Psalm and he was a shepherd who laid his life down for his sheep in the form of fighting a lion and a bear and killing them in order to protect his flock. But there were a lot of shepherds in the Bible and they were probably good shepherds - at least they were successful shepherds which implies that they took good care of their sheep. All of the patriarchs were shepherds. Abraham was rich but seemed to only get richer throughout his lifetime. Isaac inherited everything Abraham had but seemed to need to rebuild the family business. Jacob got himself in trouble with his brother and had to move to his uncle's house and start over. He fell in love with the girl shepherd, Rachel, and started over as the keeper of his uncle's sheep. To make a long story a little shorter, Jacob prospered and built a great flock for himself and his family. These men were shepherds who cared for their sheep, or otherwise they would not have been able to accumulate so many sheep.

But the first explicitly good shepherd in the Bible was Moses. He was not raised with the sheep as the patriarchs were but instead grew up in the palace of the Pharaoh. But when he fled into the desert he encountered the shepherd Jethro who had 7 daughters. The girls were being bullied by the other (male) shepherds and Moses stepped in and advocated on their behalf. Soon Moses became a part of the family and became Jethro's chief shepherd for 40 years.

So Moses must have shown an aptitude for shepherding in the desert. He kept the job for 40 years. It seems that the work of shepherding, the daily grind, the birthing and nursing and leading of sheep was great training for delivering a nation of slaves out of bondage and then leading them through a desert for 40 years. Moses lived for the sake of sheep for 40 years and then he lived for the sake of the people of Israel for 40 more years. Moses lived a life that expresses what it is to lay down your life for the sheep.

David was like Moses in that his earlier experience of shepherding sheep prepared him for an even more important expression of the art. David's Psalms reveal that he was given insight through his shepherd experience into the nature and depth of God's care for him. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea 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 runs over, Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

David saw that God was his shepherd and that He was the kind of shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep. This was seen in where he took the sheep and in his concern for their every need. It was seen in His constant presence in every circumstance, His good will for every day and for eternity. Relationship with God gave David insight into being sheep and what David experienced as that sheep was joy, joy in knowing the Lord, joy in the care that He provides.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for His sheep. Jesus laid down His life by coming as a servant of men in order to die for us. We understand the dramatic way in which Jesus has shown His love for us.

He is the shepherd who leads the righteous to green pastures

He is the servant who hands Himself over to death

He is the One who gathers His sheep

He is the One shepherd, my servant David

He is the shepherd of Israel

The substitutionary suffering servant who lays down His life

The servant seeking the still other sheep

The thing is that the Good Shepherd has sent His servants to be shepherds and to care for the lost sheep of the world. How are we to lay down our lives?