

## **Jesus, the caring Shepherd : John 10:11-18**

In the Old Testament, Yhwh is the good shepherd. New Testament writers understood that Jesus is the incarnation of Yhwh, demonstrating his identity by what he does as the good shepherd.

In times of anxiety, danger, or sorrow, Psalm 23, provides care for the human heart. Although Psalm 23 is one of the most familiar texts of the Bible, there is a persistent freshness about it. Deep wells of meaning are opened by the metaphors of shepherd and sheep, of host and guest, and they speak to one at whatever one's level of sophistication.

**The metaphor of shepherd.** For a people with an urban and industrial way of life, the metaphor of shepherd may not resonate with its full measure of meaning. Even if one knows something about sheep and the care of them, the grazing land of Palestine is quite unlike that of contemporary England. For the most part, the pastures of Palestine consist of trackless, dry hills and rough gorges, rained upon only for a few months out of the year and beaten upon relentlessly by the sun during the summer. It is in such a setting as this that we are to visualize the shepherd at work in Psalm 23. The metaphor of shepherd thus echoes with tones of selfless devotion, alertness, concern, tenderness, and security. The demands on the shepherd are eloquently described by David in his defence of his flock, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it". (1 Samuel 17:34,35).

**The metaphor of sheep** is likewise used to express Israel's relation to her leaders and to God. Without her king, Israel was like sheep without a shepherd. Israel was God's flock and the sheep of God's pasture. When the psalmist claims the LORD as personal shepherd "The Lord is my Shepherd", he gives the metaphor its greatest intimacy and depth. The psalmist indirectly likens himself to a sheep. One of the most vulnerable of animals, a sheep is helpless without leadership, guidance, care, and protection. And sheep are prone to get lost, injure themselves, and blindly follow the impulses of the flock. By this comparison, the psalmist acknowledges inadequacy, dependence, and need for a Shepherd.

As the metaphor of shepherd is paired with that of sheep, so the metaphor of host is paired with that of guest. As a guest of the LORD, the psalmist enjoys the protection of the host and, in the LORD'S presence, feels secure from enemies. As a guest of the LORD, the psalmist also participates in a meal prepared by the LORD himself, "he prepares a table .

**The image of Jesus as a shepherd.** From the gospel account, we are presented with Jesus in the image of a shepherd.

The Good Shepherd and the hired hands . An old Russian proverb states, "Without a shepherd sheep are not a flock." The image of Jesus the Good Shepherd works to defeat lesser shepherds.

"A hired man is not a real shepherd. The sheep mean nothing to him. He sees a wolf come and runs for it, leaving the sheep to be ravaged and scattered by the wolf. He's only in it for the money. The sheep don't matter to him" (The Message). Hired hands including failed

leadership are typical characteristics of bad shepherds. They have no concern for the sheep. These will bring no salvation to the sheep. Jesus is a loving and caring shepherd. He is the good shepherd who provides leadership for his flock and leads them to salvation. The good shepherd pays the highest cost to care for his sheep. He will defend his flock from danger. You are secure under his shepherding!

The anxiety, isolation, and worthlessness of sheep under hired hands are overcome by the Good Shepherd who saves the sheep by love that leads him to sacrifice all and lay down his life for the sake of the sheep. (He leaves 99 in search of one, how precious you are, he will go out of his way to find you and bring you in a place of comfort). The sheep are known by the Shepherd and are loved, freely and graciously. He knows, cares for, and loves each sheep. You are known individually and by your name.

The text assigns the other sheep to this Jesus Christ and is quite clear that there will be one flock and one Shepherd. It is Christ's work to bring these into the fold. This work is carried on in the church's mission of proclaiming the gospel in word and action to those who have not heard. The other sheep respond to the voice of the Shepherd, not to the bleating of the flock.

Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, works still to eradicate our isolation, worthlessness, and despair, our pride and complacency. In so doing, he opens for us a space to know the victory of the resurrection; space to be led in the green pastures, beside the still waters, and to dwell in the blessedness of the Lord's House. May we put our trust in Jesus, the caring Shepherd to protect us from danger and harm, and to provide for all our needs. **Amen.**