**Close to the Good Shepherd**

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Seems like every time you open the Bible, sheep appear. In Genesis, Able kept flocks while brother Caine tilled, while Jacob’s flocks produced spotted sheep. The book of Isaiah mentions sheep going astray and standing silent before the shearer. Jeremiah speaks of sheep driven away by the lions and refers to the house of Israel as the lost sheep. Jesus sent out his disciples as sheep in the midst of wolves.

There are plenty of shepherds in the Bible as well. Able was a shepherd and so was David. Today’s reading of the beloved 23rd psalm refers to the Lord as shepherd, and in the reading from John, Jesus calls himself the good shepherd.

Why so much attention to a bunch of wooly sheep? Maybe it’s because when the Bible speaks of sheep, it’s really referring to us, as in you and me! People are the real sheep of the Bible. And boy do we human sheep need a shepherd!

Wooly sheep need green pastures to survive, but clothed sheep gotta have green money. Sheep in the fields have to be led to pasture and protected from predators and storms, as well as escorted through the rain and rough terrain. But comfortable people like us seem to need--or at least want-- way more than sheep do—like refrigerators and air conditioners, microwave ovens, credit cards, bank loans, cool cars, lots of gas, and whatever else catches our eye.

Being so vulnerable, wooly sheep are next to helpless, especially around wolves, bad weather, droughts, and floods. Dressed sheep are awfully vulnerable too when you consider house payments, medical care, police protection, old age, and Starbuck’s coffee.

Speaking of wolves, sheep can’t outrun them, out-fight them, or out-bite them. But we people have much worse things to worry about than the big bad wolf: global warming, wars, mass murderers, crooked politicians, and the IRS. Sheep get panicky and flighty at the slightest thing--just like us when it comes to flu epidemics, icy streets, high cholesterol, and crazed terrorists. Sheep easily run astray from thunder, horses, motorcycles, barking dogs, and police sirens. We run astray from responsibilities, accountability, helping our neighbor, and even from dieting and exercising!

Sheep sometimes get lost and separated in unfamiliar territory and in the dark. But then it’s all too easy for us sheepish people to get lost and separated from our close friends and family, from those trying to help us, from our morals and ethics, and from God.

I guess it wouldn’t be polite to call sheep dumb, but they ain’t too smart are they? They run en masse right over cliffs; jump in front of moving cars; and sometimes get lost right in their own backyard. But so it goes with people. Aren’t we sheep dumb and sheep ornery when get deeply in debt, buy stuff we don’t need, and let the mass media brainwash us?

And speaking of brainwashing--sheep just stand there dumb while you shear them. Go figure, it’s their wool, yet they make no fuss while it’s cropped and chopped into money for enterprising humans. Ah, but people are just as easy to fleece. We stand there paying exorbitant credit card interest rates; wringing our hands over ne’er-do-well public officials; dithering about politics; and watching many of our fellow citizens try to survive on welfare.

No doubt about it, it’s easy to see why simple-minded wooly sheep need a shepherd, but what about people? At least sheep are smart enough to know who their shepherd is and to follow him into the unknown. Perhaps we don’t need a shepherd to lead us to green grass, but we sorely need one to lead us away from the quicksand of sin and self-indulgence.

Think of all those in the New Testament whose troubled lives required the Great Shepherd. Jesus led Saul away from the Christians he persecuted into the city of Damascus where he started his new life as Paul following a new shepherd. Jesus led his sometimes black sheep disciples away from their sandy fishing boats to a new life fishing for men. Peter was led to forgive people 70 X 7 times and to back away from violence like sword fighting those who came to arrest the Good Shepherd. Hard-headed disciple Thomas was led off the path of doubt onto the path of proclaiming Jesus as Messiah. Martha was led to more important things than fussing about household chores. John the Baptist imprisoned was led back to renewed faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus led Zacchaeus away from corrupt tax collecting and the common people away from hypocritical Sadducees and Pharisees. The rich young man was warned away from worshipping money. The blind man was led to seeing light with his eyes and to spiritual light for his soul. Along the road to Emmaus, the Good Shepherd led Cleopas until he finally recognized the resurrected Jesus next to him. The Samaritan woman at the well was led away from the path of sin onto the path of evangelism. And Jesus led one of the two criminals crucified with him into paradise.

Well, if Jesus was good enough to shepherd all these heroes of the Bible, I’m more than ready to follow his staff and rod. But in my human frailty, might I first ask him a few questions?

**Good shepherd, why did you choose me to join your flock?** **I have chosen you, and appointed you to produce good fruit from the lives that you live, fruit that will last. I have come, not to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many. For God so loved the world that he offered his only Son a living sacrifice, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but be redeemed and have everlasting life.**

**But what is my place in your flock? The sheep he will set on my right hand, and the goats on my left.**

**Where will us sheep begin our journey**? **Enter therefore through the narrow gate; for wide is the path, and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many go that way. But narrow is the gate and the path which leads to life**

**As the leader is charge of the flock, what do you expect from us? You cannot allow two masters to rule your life. Either you will disregard one and love the other; or else cling to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and remain enslaved to the gods of this world. Imitate me, and do the same to others as I have done for you. Unless you are willing to make a total commitment, even of what you cherish, you cannot truly follow me. You must first put aside your own desires and your self-centered ways. Sacrifice your pride and follow me.**

**Where exactly are you sending us? I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. Be as wise as serpents, but as harmless as doves. My sheep are no longer children of this dark. Blessed are you who hear the word of God and follow it where it leads.**

**Who will we meet along our journey with you?** The Son of Man is sent into the world to save those that are lost.

**What else can we expect to see on our journey? If you believe, you will see the glory of God.**

**What should we do if we need something during the journey?** **Ask, and you will receive, and your joy will be full.**

**Will you ever leave the flock during the journey? I will go to prepare a place for you. Whoever believes in me will not perish, but be redeemed and have everlasting life.**

**How will the flock be comforted while you’re away? Do not be afraid, but believe. And I will pray to the Father, and he will give you another comforter to be with you forever. Everything is possible to the one who believes.**

**What shall we do while we wait for you to return to your flock? If you love me, then keep my commandments. Learn to practice forgiveness, and your life will be filled with mercy and grace. Your lives will yield accordingly an abundant harvest: thirty, sixty, and one hundred times the good that is planted.**

**Now what about the sheep who have already completed their life’s journey with the Good Shepherd? How about a few questions about their life’s journey with the good shepherd?**

**Did you lack on your now completed journey with the good shepherd? The Lord was my shepherd; I did not want.**

**Where did the shepherd take you: To green pastures and still water**

**How did you find these pastures? The Shepherd knew all the right paths.**

**Was the journey to these pastures exhausting? They restored my soul.**

**Where else did you go on your journey? Through a dark valley where I encountered some of my enemies.**

**Weren’t you awfully fearful? I feared no evil.**

**But how could that be, since you were alone in a dark place? Because my shepherd was with me; his rod and staff comforted me. He prepared a table for me and my cup overflowed. He anointed my head with oil.**

**How did you feel at the end of your journey with the good shepherd? I was glad and fulfilled, for goodness and mercy followed me all the days of my life.**

**Now that your journey is over, where are you? Dwelling in the house of the Lord where I will be forever.**

**One last question: For those us of us in the flock still traveling with the great shepherd, how can we get CLOSE to him? Simple: CLOSE starts with the letter C, which invites us to complete the rest of our journey by Cleansing our minds and motives for walking with the son of man. Next we use the letter L in CLOSE to Love the Messiah by first loving one another. The letter O helps us get closer to our Lord as we Open his word. We can use the letter S in CLOSE for Serving others in our life journey and, lastly, we use the letter E to Enjoy the wholesome and good things our journey with Christ brings—a preview of spending eternity with him in heaven! So when you consider these wonderful things, maybe being a sheep is not so bad after all. Baa-men!**