

THE SHEPHERD OF MY SOUL

By

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OF THE ORDER OF PREACHERS

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Chapter 1

Christ the Good Shepherd.

It was announced by the prophets of old that the Messiah, who was to come, should bear the character of a good shepherd. He was to be a shepherd, and His followers, the faithful souls that should believe in Him and accept His teaching, were to be His sheep.

It was foretold that He would select and purchase His flock; that He would choose them from out the vast multitudes of their kind and gather them into His fold, that He would provide for them and guard them against every evil; that He would lead them out to green pastures and refresh them with the waters of rest.

“He shall feed his flock like a shepherd,” sang the Prophet Isaias; “he shall gather together the lambs with his arms, and shall take them up in his bosom, and he himself shall carry them that are with young.”¹

In like manner did Jeremias, referring to the comforting advent of Christ, liken the offices which the Saviour would perform towards His people to those of shepherds towards their flocks. “I will set up pastors over them,” said the Prophet, speaking in the name of Jehovah, “and they shall feed them; they shall fear no more, and they shall not be dismayed; and none shall be wanting of their number...

¹ Isa. 40:11

Behold the days come, saith the Lord, and I will raise up to David a just branch; and a king shall reign, and shall be wise, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.”²

The Prophet Ezechiel also prophetically portrayed the Saviour’s character when he pictured Him in the capacity of a shepherd visiting and feeding his sheep: “or thus saith the Lord God: Behold I myself will seek my sheep, and I will visit them. As the shepherd visiteth his flock in the day when he shall be in the midst of his sheep that were scattered, so will I visit my sheep, and I will deliver them out of all the places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day... And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd.”³

And when at length the Saviour did appear in the world, He declared, not only by His life and example, but in explicit terms, that He was the fulfilment of these prophecies—that He was, in truth, the Good Shepherd, and that His followers were the sheep of His fold.

In the tenth chapter of the Gospel according to Saint John we have His own words to this effect. There He tells us plainly that He has not come as a thief and a robber, to steal, to kill, and to destroy; that He is not a stranger, at the sound of whose voice the sheep are terrified and flee away; that He is not a hireling, who cares not for the sheep, and who, beholding the approach of the wolf and the enemy, fleeth and leaveth the sheep to be snatched and scattered and torn.

² Jer. 23:4,5

³ Ezech. 34:11-12,23

The Saviour is not any of these, nor like unto them. He is the Good Shepherd who enters the sheepfold by the door, and not as the thief and robber who climb up some other way. To Him the porter openeth, and He calleth His sheep, and they know His voice and follow Him, and He leadeth them out to pasture, to rest, and to abundant life. Nor is this all, for He protects and guards His sheep. By day and by night He is ever near them: when circling the green plains, or beside the still waters, or when asleep beneath the silent stars, the sheep are protected by their Shepherd. Faithfully He watches His dependent flock; and at the end, as a proof of His love and fidelity, He generously lays down His life for His sheep.

Chapter 2

Shepherd Life in the Orient.

We cannot appreciate the beauty of this picture of our Saviour under the symbol of a shepherd, nor can we later understand the detailed description which is given of Him through the spiritual meaning of the Good Shepherd Psalm without first taking into account some of the features of pastoral life as it prevails in eastern countries.

For us of the western world it is difficult, and at times next to impossible, to represent to ourselves the life and customs of the Orient; and in particular do we find it hard to picture to our minds and to understand the simple poetry of that shepherd life for which Palestine has always been known.

Time has little changed the scene of the Saviour's earthly labors. The people, their manners and customs, their life and occupations, remain much the same now as when the land was graced by His sacred presence. Thus today, as in those olden times, all the level country east of the river Jordan, as well as the mountains of Palestine and Syria, serves as vast pasture lands for innumerable flocks and herds. The country throughout is essentially pastoral in its character, and the care and raising of sheep constitute the chief industry of the people. From sheep the people are furnished with nearly all the necessaries of life—with meat, clothing, milk, butter, and cheese.

The care of sheep is a delicate and, in many ways, a difficult task. Not that they are froward or hard to manage, for of all animals they are the most tender and gentle; nor again, that they need abundant nourishment in the way of food and drink, since they require water but once a day, and can maintain life and strength on a plain which, to the naked eye, seems little more than a barren waste of sand.

But because, in other respects, they are exceedingly timid and helpless creatures, especially in times and places of danger, the burdens which their welfare and safety impose upon the shepherd, while paternal and winning, are, nevertheless, arduous and manifold.

There are the changes and hardships of the climate—the cold and frost in winter, and the heat and drought of summer; there are the long rough walks, the steep and dangerous passes which they must climb and descend; there are perils from robbers, from wolves and wild beasts, which not infrequently demand the shepherd's utmost watchfulness and care. The oriental climate is such that they can graze nearly the whole year through; and whether they be grazing on the wide open plains, or huddled snugly within the sheepfold, it pertains to the shepherd to provide for their varied needs. His vigilance can never cease. He must lead them out to pasture and to water, he must guide and protect them, he must gather them into the fold at night or into caves and enclosures, at times, during the day, to shield them from great danger, whether from enemies or violent weather; and upon all occasions he must be prepared to defend them, even at the risk of his own life.

The folds or sheep pens, it must be observed, into which the sheep are gathered for rest or protection are not roofed over or walled in like a house. They are enclosures left open to the sky, and consisting simply of a high wall of rough stone, to protect the sheep from the attacks of wild beasts, and from prowling marauders who threaten their safety by night. It often happens that several flocks, belonging to different shepherds, will graze on the same pastures during the day, and will be penned in the same sheepfold at night.

While the sheep are sleeping, and the shepherds nearby are taking their needed rest, the door of the fold is carefully locked, and another shepherd or porter is left on guard, lest perchance a hungry bear or wolf might scale the wall and destroy some member or members of the sleeping herds. Early in the morning the shepherds come in turn and rap at the door, and to each the porter opens. Then each shepherd calls his flock by name; and they, knowing his voice, follow him, and he leads them out to their pastures. There is never any confusion, for each flock knows its own shepherd and obeys him alone. Other shepherds they will not heed; and from the voice of strangers they flee.

It is a beautiful scene to see a shepherd with his flock. First, we must remember that he never drives them, but leads them; and they follow him with instinctive love and trust whithersoever he goes. He usually carries a rod and a staff: the latter he uses, when need be, to assist the sheep along dangerous paths and narrow passages; the former, to protect and defend them, if assailed by enemies or beasts of prey.

Another evidence of their implicit love of their shepherd and trust in his goodness, as also of their obedience to his voice and commands, is beautifully manifest when several flocks are led to drink at the same stream or well. Although the sheep need to drink but once a day, the shepherds never forget, throughout the day's roaming, that they must lead their flock to water. And as the drinking places in Palestine are comparatively few, it often happens that several herds, whether from the same or neighboring pastures, will arrive simultaneously at the same spring.

But here again, there is neither trouble nor confusion. When they have drawn near to the place of water each shepherd gives a sign to his flock, and obedient to his voice, the respective flocks lie down and patiently wait their turn to drink. The troughs are then filled with the refreshing water, and when all is ready a shepherd calls and his flock at once rises and comes forward to drink. The sheep being satisfied, the shepherd gives another sign, and they promptly return to their previous place of rest, or move quietly away to their pasture, as the shepherd may direct. Another flock is then called up, watered and led away, and so on, in like manner, till all have been duly satisfied.

With this passing glance at shepherd life, we can better understand and better appreciate the likeness between the character of the Saviour and that of the good shepherd. We can see how apt it was that our Redeemer should choose a shepherd, with his multiple and tender cares and duties, to illustrate His own watchfulness and loving kindness towards the many wants and needs of our souls.

For we are, indeed, His sheep. He has called us, we have heard and understood His voice, and He has gathered us into His flock and fold. He has literally vindicated for Himself in our regard all the attributes and qualities of the good shepherd, so far as described, and as still further depicted in every verse of the twenty-second Psalm. This is called the Psalm of the Good Shepherd, because in it the Psalmist, under the symbol of a shepherd, prophetically foretold the character of the Messiah, our Saviour.

The psalm has, therefore, a twofold meaning: in its literal sense it deals with the faithful shepherd, ranging with his flock over mountains and plains, and providing for their every want; and in its spiritual and prophetic meaning it relates to our Creator and Saviour, caring for our spiritual necessities. Let us see how this is; and that we may better perceive the application in detail, let us take this shepherd song, part by part, and see how beautifully it describes the whole person of Christ as God, and in His capacity as Redeemer—in all His tender relations with us, and towards the various needs of our souls.

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