

The Great Shepherd

“Now the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of an eternal covenant restore you in every good thing to the end that you may do the will of God, working in you that which is well pleasing before Him through Jesus Christ, to whom is the glory forever. Amen” (Hebrews 13:20,21)

It would be assumed by any reasonable person that if the Creator of the universe had any interaction at all with His creatures, it would certainly be in a grander context than a shepherd. We would expect at least some “Deific” aloofness, if not the ultimate Imperial Overlord. To cast the Son of God as a shepherd would be beyond the imagination of the human writer. This is one of the evidences of the authenticity of the Bible. What human mind would have conceived this kind of analogy? Nevertheless, the shepherd theme runs throughout the entire Bible. David is the prominent type, the quintessential exponent of the shepherd theme and, in fact, the progenitor of the royal line through which Christ came. The life of David as the shepherd-king is the complete analogy to Christ even to the woeful episodes of David’s plunge into the darkness of the Satanic realm. Of course, Christ did not, Himself, engage in sin, but identified vicariously with that dreadful odyssey of the corruption of His creatures.

So David, the shepherd, tending his father’s sheep on the hillsides of Judea, gave us the songs of the shepherd, by which we understand the Great Shepherd heart of God.

And yet we must go back half a millenium before David to pick up the trail of the shepherd. There, Moses, raised in the household of Pharaoh and heir to the throne, fled from the Pharaoh for honor and fear and wound up tending the flocks of Jethro, his father-in-law—wandering for forty years in the wilderness of Sinai. Ultimately, he became the invincible leader of the people of God—the chief spokesman for the Divine Revelation which was the forerunner of the redemption through Christ. But, before he could lead the people of God he had to first learn the lesson of the shepherd. God’s people are like sheep—needing to be lead; not like cattle—needing to be driven.

It is singularly significant that the first to hear the message of the birth of Christ at Bethlehem, were shepherds tending their sheep on the hillsides of Judea. Considering the fact that they were only a few miles from Jerusalem, one would expect the display to have been seen all over Jerusalem. It is quite possible that only the eyes of the shepherds were open to see. It has been true throughout Scripture that God is selective about those to whom He reveals Himself. A notable incident illustrating this point occurred with Elisha, the prophet, when he was under siege by Syrian chariots. His servant was terrified at the sight of the chariots and ran to his master. Elisha merely said, *“Open the young man’s eyes, Lord.”* And the young man went again and saw the chariots of God surrounding the prophet. At the birth of Jesus, God had purposely revealed Himself to the shepherds first and could very well have hidden the Great Choir of Angels from all others.

It is further significant that Jesus came to birth in a stable. From the moment of His birth to the entry into Jerusalem on a donkey; from the washing of feet in the upper room to the ignominious death on the cross, Jesus' life was a lowly one. Paul comments on this humiliation to the Philippians—*“Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, considered it not a thing to be grasped to be equal with God, but emptied Himself and took upon Himself the form of a servant, becoming in the likeness of men; and having been found in the form of a man, He made himself lowly and became submissive unto death, even the death of the cross”* (2:5-8).

And, of course, the symbolism of the sacrificial lamb takes the death of Christ out of the noble and heroic martyrdom and remands it to the place of ignominy and humiliation.

But what is the lesson here? The image of Christ, the meek and lowly; the servant and shepherd; is universally seen. He has never appeared to the world as the Mighty Conqueror—even to many of those who see Him as Saviour. There is a question in the minds of many as to His power to overcome the rampant evil that has engulfed the world. Will the lowly Shepherd ever become the Mighty King? In response, we hear the thundering cry from Revelation—*“The Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.”* Somehow, in His own time, Christ will seize the reins of power in delivering the world from the chains of darkness. The destiny of Satan is inevitably and irrevocably, destruction. But not yet.

Meanwhile, the entire thrust of Scripture is the total weakness of humans and their inability to accomplish anything of significance apart from the direct power and energy of God. Jesus said, *“Without Me you can do nothing.”* And Paul said—*“When I am weak, then I am strong.”* Paul also told the Corinthians that God works through the weak and the lowly to accomplish His purpose. *“For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many well-born; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world, that He may disable the wise, and the weak things of the world has God chosen, that He may disable the strong, and the ill-born of the world and the things that are of no account has God chosen, the things that are nothing, in order that He may render ineffective the things that are something, so that no flesh may glory in itself before God. For of Him are you in Christ Jesus, who has become wisdom to us from God, both righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order even as it is written, he who glories, let him glory in the Lord”* (I Corinthians 1:26-31, Author's translation).

Therefore, He has been the “Good Shepherd” who has laid down His life for His sheep. And now He is the Great Shepherd, accomplishing in the life of His sheep, the restoration and fulfillment of His purposes for them.

In succeeding issues, we will be discussing this text in detail. However, in a summary conclusion, the focus of the passage is not upon human efforts to achieve perfection. In fact, the Greek word *katartidzo*—means rather to restore or mend, then to make perfect (more about this later). Furthermore, the emphasis is upon the power of Christ, through His death and resurrection, to do a work within us, according to His own will, to make us well-pleasing in His sight. Paul said to the Philippians—*“Being confident of this very thing that He*

which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6).

In a day when the emphasis from the pulpit seems always to be on human determination and strength of will to accomplish piety and perfection, let us look to the “Great Shepherd” to supply the power that we do not have for the accomplishing of a fulfillment that we can never reach.

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