

The shepherd and his sheep

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

When you read this Psalm it is almost certainly the picture of a shepherd with his sheep that automatically comes to mind. It is likely also that you will see immediately that the main thought is the care that the shepherd has for the sheep, a care so complete that *I shall not be in want*. But it is important to know that in at least three significant respects the picture differs from that of the modern, western shepherd and his sheep. The first difference is that David's picture is of sheep that were vulnerable and exposed to danger. As the psalm indicates there were dangers from steep valleys, and perhaps, at times, from rushing streams. More than that, there were wild animals always glad of an easy meal; a lion, a bear or a wolf (1 Samuel 17:34–35; John 10:12). There were human predators as well: thieves, bandits, marauding enemies from the countries around Israel looking for flocks or crops they could steal (John 10:8,10; Judges 6:4,11). All very different from woolly flocks in green fields with fences round them, though not quite so different from sheep in more mountainous areas.

The second difference is that the shepherd was out on the hills with the sheep, watching over them day and night. The very first time we ever hear about David we read, “There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered, “but he is tending the sheep.” Samuel said, “Send for him” (1 Samuel 16:11). The shepherd was out where the sheep were (cf. Luke 2:8), to protect them and to guide them: *I will fear no evil, for you are with me* (v. 4). The third difference is that the shepherd was leading the sheep, rather than driving them as shepherds do today: *he leads me* (v. 2). This meant that the sheep were safe when they followed the shepherd. They learnt to recognize his voice, to respond to his call and follow where he led (John 10:27). These points are well-known, but the lesson is important: do not jump to conclusions from your own experience about what the Bible is saying. You need to discover what the biblical picture really is. In this case other parts of

Scripture which speak of sheep and shepherds are very useful. Comparing Scripture with Scripture is a basic principle of interpretation. Books which explain the background, such as Bible dictionaries or commentaries, are also very helpful. The primary task, though, is to think carefully about the particular passage you are reading. What is it actually saying? Does it fit in with what I expect? Are there things I need to discover about the background which will give me a clearer understanding of what is being said?

A selective picture

If you think about it, this picture of the shepherd is actually a selective one. The process of selectivity is one that is likely to go on in your mind without you realizing it. Automatically you reduce the role of the shepherd to the care of the sheep—for this is what the psalm is clearly about. But it would be possible to ask why the shepherd has a flock of sheep in the first place. Does he own them because he wants their wool; because he milks them and makes cheese for his family and to be sold? Are the sheep due to be slaughtered, either for food or sacrifice? By focusing on the wool and milk it would be possible to change the picture into one in which the sheep are to serve the shepherd. Instead of the emphasis being on the shepherd providing for the sheep, it would be on the sheep providing for the needs of the shepherd. The application would then be on the importance of our service for the Lord, producing in our lives those acts and attitudes that he is looking for. It would be possible to go even further and suggest that the sheep might have been destined for sacrifice at the tabernacle and so we should render sacrificial service. But such interpretations of Psalm 23 would be without foundation. There is nothing in the psalm itself to suggest them, all the stress is on what the shepherd does for the sheep. So be careful in the interpretation and application of Scripture. It is all too possible to extend an illustration, or press a passage, beyond what Scripture is actually saying.

The ideal shepherd

David, of course, says, *The LORD is my shepherd*. We tend to start off with the shepherd/sheep idea, but the interpreter must be sensitive to what the

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author is saying. David puts the emphasis on the LORD. He is the one who shepherds him. David doesn't recognize any human being as his shepherd, not Saul as king, nor even Samuel, God's prophet. He has no time for, or trust in, the gods worshipped by other nations. The thought probably is, then, that the LORD is the ideal shepherd. Over against all other possible shepherds, here is the best shepherd of all. Supreme care and provision is found with the LORD: *I shall not be in want.*

Beyond the picture of the shepherd and his sheep

So it is important not to jump to conclusions from our own knowledge of shepherding in the western world in the present day. Of course, with many of us this may not be real knowledge at all, simply ideas we have picked up which may be more or less accurate. This principle applies to the whole of the Bible. Be cautious about other occupations and customs which you find in the Bible. Take, as another example, slavery in New Testament days. Such slavery was very different from the slave trade of the eighteenth century, when Africans were transported in appalling conditions to the American colonies. Consider this quotation:

Both terms (the Greek words *oiketes* and *doulos*) have also been translated 'slave' (NIV), but the horrible degradation of slaves in 19th-century America gives the word 'slave' a far worse connotation than is accurate for most of the society to which Peter was writing. Although mistreatment of slaves could occur then too, it must be remembered that 1st-century slaves were generally well treated and were not only unskilled labourers but often managers, overseers, and trained members of the various professions (doctors, nurses, teachers, musicians, skilled artisans). There was extensive Roman legislation regulating the treatment of slaves. They were normally paid for their services and could expect eventually to purchase their freedom'.¹

Grudem probably overstates his case because there could be extreme cruelty shown to slaves in New Testament times. Nevertheless what he has to say about the type of profession a slave might have and the payment of slaves is important for our understanding. Slavery in Old Testament times was different again, though here we are given much more information in the Bible itself; and slavery in Israel differed from what happened in other

nations. In other words take care to find out the background of different parts of the Bible, insofar as this is possible.

Selectivity again

We noticed that the picture of the shepherd is actually a selective one, the focus is on only one aspect of shepherding. This is a point to remember in other places. For instance, when Paul says in Philippians 3:2, ‘Watch out for those dogs’, what does he have in mind? Quite clearly he is not referring to animals, but rather those he calls *evil workers* who were advocating circumcision for Gentile Christians. But why *dogs*? We are likely to think of dogs biting; some houses still have notices on the garden gate, ‘Beware of the dog’. But it is unlikely that Paul was thinking in those terms. Nor is he being plain rude! At that time Jews applied the word *dogs* to Gentiles, and even to lapsed Jews, because they were considered ritually unclean. Here Paul is turning the word back on these Judaizers, as they are called. They are the ones who are unclean and so outside the boundary of God’s people. The picture is a selective one: not every canine quality is in view.

The same thing is clear in the parable of Jesus usually known as the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1–13). The point is not that the steward was unjust, but that he acted shrewdly, and that, very often, the children of light do not act shrewdly. They can learn from him that they should act carefully and wisely, especially with their worldly wealth, making friends for eternity.

Idealization

In speaking as he does about the LORD, David shows him to be the ideal shepherd. This is an important point which is helpful in a number of respects. Some have found it difficult to see how David can really point forward to Jesus Christ as king in view of his adultery with Bathsheba, and his responsibility for the death of Uriah. The same problem arises with Solomon, with his many wives and concubines and his lapse into idolatry at the end of his life. But Jesus as Christ, the anointed one, is the true King, the ideal king, he is all that a king should be. David is a picture of Christ as a victorious king, but he was not the perfect king himself. His very sins show the need for the perfect king to come. Solomon is a king of peace with

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widespread prosperity throughout his kingdom, but he is not perfect either. There is only one who fulfils the ideal of kingship perfectly and that is Jesus Christ. The same is true if we think of the priests; they all failed, they needed to offer for their own sins. They pointed to the need for a perfect priest. So it was with the prophets. It is true that their words were given under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and so they were always accurate and reliable. But there was always a discrepancy between their words and what they were. Only one could be the Prophet, the one who not only spoke the word but was the Word, the very embodiment of truth.

Comparison and contrast

Another way of looking at this is to think of the contrasts as well as the comparisons. There are points of comparison between the eastern shepherd and the LORD as shepherd, and that is what we naturally think about. But in fact there are always contrasts. The earthly shepherd is never the same as the heavenly, nor the earthly father as the heavenly Father, nor is the earthly Jerusalem really a holy city, while the heavenly Jerusalem certainly is (Revelation 21:2,10).

We have to do the same kind of thing when we think of God as Father. It is true that comparing human fatherhood can help in understanding God the Father in relation to the Son, and in his relationship to believers as his adopted children. But those who teach children always have to be aware that there are fathers who are not good models of fatherhood at all, so that in some cases speaking of God as Father can be a hindrance rather than a help. The fact is that fatherhood is only truly seen in God, human fatherhood since the Fall is always a pale imitation of the real thing. Do not think that God is made in our image; men and women have been made in his image, not the other way round. So a shepherd's care for his sheep is an inadequate and partial illustration of the immense and glorious care that God has for those who trust him

Note

- 1 **Wayne Grudem**, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, IVP, 1988), pp. 123–4.