

One of the most famous pictures of Jesus is a shepherd holding a sheep. What are the thoughts or emotions which run through your mind when you see that? Comfort? Serenity? Peace? Picturesque scenery? A place to get away from all the distractions of this life? I have to confess the closest I've ever been to sheep is at a petting zoo, and an extremely small one at that. I was separated by a fence. I stayed for maybe five or ten minutes. I never grew up on a sheep farm or have seen them in their natural habitat in the British Isles or in New Zealand. Most of us here in America treasure the picture of Jesus as a Good Shepherd and cherish the words "The Lord is My Shepherd," but the entire lifestyle of shepherding is, if we're honest, increasingly irrelevant and often far from our minds in our modern world.

How different for a Palestinian shepherd! I have a new-found appreciation for them after seeing the Bedouins up close and personal a year ago in the barren landscape of Jordan and Israel. For centuries, even millennia, they have cared for their sheep, camels, and other animals not on a lush hillside like we might picture in Ireland, but in a desert. It's a culture which has survived to this very day. No fancy stables or John Deere tractors, just tents. Not a gentle rain to slowly water the abundant grass, but a blistering wind and a sweltering sun. Shepherding was not comfort and peace *separate from* the threats and difficulties of the world, as our pictures of Jesus often indicate. Shepherding was comfort and peace *in spite of* the grave threats and difficulties of this world. Here in the account of Goliath's grave threat on God's people, we're encouraged to "**See the Good Shepherd through a good shepherd.**"

One day the champion Goliath, the giant, the soldier since his youth, decked out in all his bronze armor from head to toe, steps out on a hill, and shouts his challenges across to the valley to the timid Israelite camp. For the past forty days of psychological warfare, Goliath had been heaping abuse on the Israelites. The Israelite soldiers were trusting in outward weapons and impressive appearance rather than in the Lord's promises. In that time and culture, a champion from each side would represent the gods of each army. The entire army did not need to fight as the winner would show whose gods or God was supreme.

In the face of such a threat, David pointed to his shepherding experience as the credentials to fight Goliath despite his lackluster appearance. Whenever a lion or bear attacked the sheep, protection of the flock meant elimination of the enemy. David did not just try to shoo them away. He had to kill the wild animals. The danger to the flock became his own danger. He did this willingly and without compulsion. Jewish law made it clear that shepherds were not required or expected to risk their life in protection of the sheep. Just like David freely put his life on the line to protect the sheep, David also put his life on the line to protect Israel from the threat of Goliath. In spite of the all misplaced trust of the Israelite army and of Saul himself, who should have been the first to fight Goliath as an impressive king "a head above all the rest," David trusted that the battle is the Lord's. In David's mind, the impressive Goliath is reduced to a mere animal. The Lord will deliver him from Goliath just like he did in the past with the lion and bear. "***Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.***" David fully trusts that deliverance and protection comes from the Lord.

No wonder the people of that time chose the picture of a shepherd for their leader! The shepherd would lead, not drive or follow after, the sheep for months in the dry, desert-like

summer across vast areas to find water. From David onward, the shepherd and the king would be united into one person, and the people would be called a flock. A shepherd needed bravery in the face of grave challenges. So did the king. The shepherd needed to show gentle correction to bring his wandering sheep back. So did the king. But above all, the shepherd needed to place the care for his sheep above his own wants. So did the king. All the qualities the people looked for in a shepherd God looked for in the leader for his people.

Once in a while I stumble across a show on the Discovery Channel which features contestants who volunteer to survive for a month or so in the middle of nowhere in a jungle in South America or a desert in Africa or Asia. I have no idea why anyone would freely do such a thing to themselves. Quite quickly I realize how easy we have it in twenty-first century America, and how brilliant the Israelites and other peoples at that time were to be able to survive. If I were dropped off in the middle of nowhere in a Mideastern desert with some sheep, I would first ask, “Where’s the Farm and Fleet to get some feed for these sheep? I’ll check with Google how I can get to the Super-Walmart.” I’d be completely dependent on modern stores and modern technology. I couldn’t possibly last for more than a few days. Those ancient shepherds were not the scum of society or uneducated idiots who couldn’t bother to find another job. If we could ever have met one – his eyes worn from peering out over the desolate, mountainous landscape for wild animals and pasture scattered across miles, his face weather-beaten, his frame bent over his staff, yet his heart close to each and every one of those sheep – our respect would immediately skyrocket.

When the wild animals, thieves, and robbers come in your life as you follow such a shepherd, what’s your plan? Do you operate according to the principle of not departing even one inch from him, or seeing how much wandering you can do before he will come and find you? How many voices do you listen to and trust, one among many, or one and only one? Are you at least willing to entertain the possibility that the many voices of religious pluralism today don’t pose as much of a threat as a ferocious lion or bear? “Jesus + many other paths to God” and “Jesus + many other paths to happiness and fulfillment” certainly sound harmless. Certainly it’d be a bit of an exaggeration to say they pose just as much of a threat as a ferocious animal. Certainly it’d be far better to just politely shoo them away instead of destroy them. After all Jesus, how can wandering really pose that dangerous of a threat when I and our society are doing just fine now? Distraction can come so easily. The scenery is so pretty. The bears and lions in their habitat are beautiful to look at. All Satan needs is a split second to take your eyes off your shepherd. He can use that to finally lead us to distrust our Shepherd and convince us with his idolatrous lie that we can protect ourselves better all by ourselves than our Shepherd can.

If you think David was a good shepherd, see David’s greater Son, Jesus the Good Shepherd! Just like David, Jesus refuses to let his sheep be destroyed by the conniving threats that lead them away from him. Just like David, no law required him to put his life on the line for his sheep. Only love did. Just like David, he went first and led his sheep into the wilderness. He knows first-hand the threats that face us. When Satan whispers through the false shepherds, “There are many gates to heaven,” Jesus snatches us back into his hand and says, “Only I died for them to give them life to the full.” When Satan wants to distract us by thinking the lions and bears are not very threatening, Jesus says, “Only I have conquered over them.” When Satan wants you to doubt if you can ever stay in his fold, Jesus say, “Only I know them each by name.” Jesus did not die and rise and leave it at that. He did so to reassure us he is the first to go face first into the danger itself, to conquer over it by his death on the cross, and to give us full life

through his resurrection, and to protect us from those who want to destroy life. He is still right by your side today. He leads and protects you from the dangers on the path of life.

Our society certainly has many false shepherds that want to seem innocent but still mislead and deceive the sheep. Reject all those whispers! You already know your true Good Shepherd's voice. Follow your Good Shepherd wherever he leads! He has already gone out in front of you to face everything you will first. That might mean being the only one at work will is willing to take a stand that, "Jesus is *the* gate to the pasture of heaven. There are no side doors or windows. Not a gate among many." That might mean being the minority in saying that your main purpose in life now is to be equipped to do the will of the great Shepherd of the sheep, not work your way up the ladder of corporate America or raise kids to make you proud one day. The path will be rough. The path will go through mountain passes and dry deserts. The path will be barren. But look ahead. Your Shepherd is forging that path for you.

When the landscape looks desolate, the threats dangerous, and your strength draining, don't despair. Remember what has happened in the past. The Lord delivered David from the lion and bear. The Lord delivered David from Goliath. If he did that all with a good shepherd, he will certainly do the same with the Good Shepherd. Amen.