

## The Shepherd. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 30 May 2012.

This is the last of our studies on the names and titles of our Lord Jesus. Last week, we considered one of the least familiar of those titles; namely, that of 'The Righteous One'. By way of contrast, our subject for this morning is among the best known – and best loved – of all our Lord's titles ... that of 'the Shepherd'.

Indeed, we find that this title occurs many times in the New Testament ... from the opening section of the Gospel according to Matthew, which refers back to the word of God spoken some 700 years before, when He revealed that out of Bethlehem in the land of Judah was to come 'a Ruler who will *shepherd* my people Israel'<sup>1</sup>... from there right through to the closing book of the New Testament – the Book of the Revelation – which looks on to a glorious time when (speaking of God's people – and I quote) 'the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will *shepherd* them ... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes'.<sup>2</sup>

There is, of course, no way in which I can do justice to the many references in the Bible to our Lord Jesus as a Shepherd. I shall therefore refer briefly to just four passages.

First, I note that He is described as what I might call '**The Gentle Shepherd**'. Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah ... 'He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom'.<sup>3</sup>

Whenever I read those words, 'He will *gather the lambs in His arms*', I am reminded of two incidents during our Lord's life on earth – recorded for us in chapters 9 and 10 of the Gospel according to Mark ... first – when His disciples were arguing which of them was the greatest, we read that, 'He took a child ... and *taking him in His arms*, He said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me"<sup>4</sup>, and second – when His disciples rebuked those who brought very young children to Him that He might touch them, we read that, 'He *took them in His arms* and blessed them'.<sup>5</sup> Certainly His tenderness and care marked our Saviour out as 'The Gentle Shepherd in His life'.

But, second, I note that He spoke of Himself – and that twice – as '**The Good Shepherd**'. Listen to His words in the well-known passage in John 10 ... 'He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep ... The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice'. Let me pause there for a moment. 'He (the shepherd of the sheep)' calls his own sheep by name and *leads them out*, Jesus said.

I was reading on the weekend of a group of tourists in Israel who had been informed by their Israeli tour guide that – unlike in the West - shepherds in the Middle East always lead their flocks from the front. He told his attentive listeners that they never 'drive' the sheep from behind. A short time later they passed a flock on the road where a man they assumed was the shepherd was walking *behind* the sheep. The tourists quickly drew this to their guide's attention, and he stopped the bus to step out and have a word with the man. As he boarded the bus he had a 'sheepish' grin on his face, and announced to his eager listeners, 'That wasn't the shepherd, that was the butcher!'<sup>6</sup>

The shepherd 'goes before them', we read that Jesus said, 'and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice'. And He then added, 'I am the Good Shepherd (the beautiful, the noble, the excellent Shepherd, the word suggests). The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep ... I am the Good Shepherd ... and I lay down my life for the sheep ... I lay down my life that I may take it up again ... I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again'.<sup>7</sup>

'The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep', Jesus said. And certainly, the ultimate test of a true shepherd is his willingness to risk his life for the protection and the preservation of his sheep. I am reminded of the words of David in the Old Testament – long before he was made king – speaking to the then King Saul before he (David) went to face the Philistine champion, 'Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and ... delivered it out of his mouth'.<sup>8</sup>

Yesterday I came across an account of one faithful shepherd in the more recent past – an account written by a man who spent 25 years as a missionary in Syria and Palestine – and I quote, 'when the thief and the robber come (and come they do), the faithful shepherd has often to put his life in his hand to defend his flock. I have known more than one case in which he had literally to lay it down in the contest. A poor faithful fellow last spring, between Tiberias and Tabor, instead of fleeing, actually fought three Bedouin robbers until he was hacked to pieces with their daggers, and died among the sheep he was defending'.<sup>9</sup>

Faithful and noble shepherd indeed. But how much greater the sacrifice of Him who is the Good – the matchless – Shepherd ... who, out of love for those who loved Him not, willingly laid down His life ... facing – and bearing – for us the judgement which was properly ours. According to one Old Testament prophet, God Himself declared, 'Awake, O sword, against my Shepherd... smite the Shepherd'<sup>10</sup> ... when, out of love for me, He (God) **laid** my

sins on Him, who, out of love for me, **laid** down His life. Only God and He – the Good Shepherd – know the price He paid.

Not that the Good Shepherd's laying down of His life for His sheep was the last chapter. Not by a long way. For, as I quoted earlier, He said, 'I lay down my life *that I may take it up again* ... I have authority to lay it down, and *I have authority to take it up again*'.

And that brings me to my third point – that He who was 'the Gentle Shepherd' in His life, and 'the Good Shepherd' in His death, proved to be '**the Great Shepherd**' in His resurrection. One of the New Testament epistles more or less closes with the words, 'the God of peace ... *brought again from the dead* our Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep'.<sup>11</sup>

My fourth and final point is that the One who was 'the Gentle Shepherd' in His life, 'the Good Shepherd' in His death, and 'the Great Shepherd' in His resurrection, is '**the Glad Shepherd**' in the salvation of every repentant sinner. Let Him tell the story Himself. We read that when the Pharisees and scribes of His day grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them', He told them this parable: 'What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine ... and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing ... Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over *one sinner who repents* than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance'.<sup>12</sup>

I suspect that many here are reminded of the words of the old gospel hymn :

But none of the ransomed ever knew  
How deep were the waters crossed,  
Nor how dark was the night the Lord passed through  
Ere He found His sheep that was lost ...

And all through the mountains, thunder riven  
And up from the rocky steep,  
There arose a **glad** cry to the gate of Heaven,  
Rejoice! I have found my sheep!  
And the angels echoed around the throne,  
Rejoice, for the Lord brings back His own!

And I think of an even older hymn which takes up the same thought :

*He and I, in that bright glory,  
One deep joy shall share—  
Mine, to be forever with Him;  
His, that I am there.*

I certainly don't need to tell you that this coming weekend has been chosen to mark our Queen's 60 years reign. As you know, her coronation took place at Westminster Abbey – the same venue as was used over five and a half years earlier for her wedding to the Duke of Edinburgh. And, on that happy occasion, two hymns were sung – the second of which was 'The Lord's my shepherd' – a paraphrase of David's Psalm 23 – the first line of which leaves us this morning with the question, 'Can I confidently say that this Gentle, Good, Great and Glad Shepherd is truly **my** Shepherd?'

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#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 2. 5-6; Micah 5. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. 7. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. 40. 11. It should be noted that Isaiah 40. 10 is applied to the Lord Jesus in Revelation 22. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 9. 33-37.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 10. 13-16.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (P&R, 2010), 156. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2012/05/23/shepherds-always-lead-from-the-front/>

<sup>7</sup> John 10. 2-18.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Sam. 17. 34-35.

<sup>9</sup> '*The Land and the Book*', W. M. Thomson, volume 1, page 302.

<sup>10</sup> Zech. 13. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Heb. 13. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 15. 2-7.