

## **The Voice of the Good Shepherd**

I can't tell you how often I've heard people say over the past several weeks, "*God is trying to get our attention. This is God telling us something.*" You know what? You're right! It's strange how God works, isn't it? It's sad actually. It's sad that it takes a tragedy to get our attention; to get us focused up on God. But... as the old saying goes: "*God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.*" I know this will sound strange, given the fact that our focus is on God working in/through something terrible like corona virus, but I'm reminded of the love of the Good Shepherd. Let me explain.

A pastor-friend of mine relayed a story of an encounter he had with an old farmer. The farmer raised sheep. Understandably, this meant that there were a fair amount of lambs running around the farm. Big sheep make little sheep. Being where they were in the country, the lambs were on the menu for a variety of different animals that lurked about the farm, especially coyotes. The farmer overcame this threat by keeping the little lambs safe in a ***fenced-in, enclosed pasture area***. All is well, right? Problem solved. My pastor-friend, who was visiting with the farmer and his family, looked out over this huge lamb pasture and noticed one of the lambs with a leg in a cast. Being the softy that he is, he lamented to the farmer how *sorry* he felt for the lamb with the broken leg. It hurt his heart to watch that little lamb hobble around, and not be able to jump and leap and run with the rest of his little lamb buddies. The farmer then explained to my buddy that the lamb's broken leg was not a result of an unfortunate accident, ***but a result of the farmer's love and care.***

You see, the farmer explained that the lamb continually found his way out of the safe, enclosed fenced-in area. This lamb was ***hell-bent*** on getting out and having things his way. He'd crawl under the fence. He'd work a hole in the fence and squeeze through. He even figured out how to get over the fence with the help of other unsuspecting lambs who happened to be grazing nearby, jumping right off their backside and piggy-backing up and over to the other side. The farmer ***purposefully*** broke the leg of this little lamb so he would stay put and out of the mouths of all those animals who were undoubtedly keeping a close eye on the pasture and its occupants, just waiting for that one opportunity for an easy meal. ***He purposefully maimed his little lamb, not out of anger or some sick sense of cruelty, but out of protective love for the foolish little lamb.***

I want you to think about this for a moment, and don't worry: I'm not advocating this as a form of pastoral care that I'm going to use with you, nor am I saying that God ***purposefully*** seeks to maim us and cause us harm. God does not ***cause*** the pain and suffering in our lives, but He does ***permit*** it to happen. There is

a difference. Think about this little prodigal lamb's plight from the perspective of the trials and tribulations you encounter in your life. How often we encounter *trouble and grief and pain and suffering*, and then wrongly assume that we're being broken and punished by an *angry* God or, worse yet, by some cosmic, karmic forces that are aligned against us because we did bad, and now we're having bad returned to us.

Did you ever stop to think that your loving Good Shepherd has *permitted* [not caused] these things to happen to you because He loves you, and this was the only way to get your attention and get you to stop in your hell-bent ways before worse pain and suffering and sin came about? Did you ever stop to think that maybe your *metaphorical sinful leg* was maimed and broken so as to save you and protect you and get you grounded back in the safety and peace of the Good Shepherd's care and pasture? I don't think it's a coincidence that most people tend to get "real religious" after life hits the fan. They didn't need God when things were good, and, consequently, they wound up straying away and falling away. But as soon as they felt a little pain and fear in their life—as soon as they were quarantined and Walmart ran out of toilet paper, they turned tail and cried out to their Good Shepherd.

I don't need a show of hands, but how many of you can admit to occasionally acting like that little lamb who was hell-bent on having things its own way? We all do it. We all have our plans and visions as to how things are supposed to work, *even in matters of faith and church*. We're going to do this, that, and the other thing, and God, our Good Shepherd, is expected to simply stand by meekly and mildly, blessing us, protecting us, and rewarding us all along the way. It's only *after* we find ourselves beat down, broken, and in the jaws of peril that we dare to cry out, "*Why God? Why have you forsaken me?*" God didn't leave you. You left Him. You wandered away from Him.

But that's just it—you do call out to God. It's in the midst of that sinful brokenness and despair that you do cry out. Now turn around. Repent, tuck tail, and turn around to your Lord and Savior. Your Good Shepherd has never left you. In fact, He's been there all along, trying to chase you down and catch you and protect you *before you run head-long into the all-too eager mouths of sin, death, and the devil*. He's been there all along, fighting those beasts that seek to devour you, chew you up, and spit you out.

This is another aspect of the Good Shepherd that we rarely ever think about or talk about. It just doesn't match our vision of a meek and quiet and lowly peacenik kind of shepherd. *But this is the Good Shepherd's reality*. Our Good Shepherd is constantly there to protect us and lead us. He's not standing by idly on the periphery of life. He's actively engaged in our lives. "*I am with you always*,

*to the very end of the age.*” He actively fights the sinful beasts of sin, death, and the devil that seek to devour us. In fact, this Good Shepherd’s fight cost Him His life. Think about that. Your green pastures and cool waters and over-flowing cups came with **great cost**—the body and blood of God Himself. Your Good Shepherd fought and killed these sinful, wretched beasts with His own body. He conquered. He vanquished. He won, but that victory **necessarily** included His suffering and death. He laid down His life to protect and save you, all so that you could have life and joy and peace and comfort with Him for all eternity.

In a very real way, our heavenly Father not only broke His precious lamb for our good; He killed Him. Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God, allowed Himself to be maimed and broken in death by His Good Shepherd and Father so that we, the wayward and rebellious sheep, could have life and peace and comfort. All this was done out of a love for you that you will never be able to fully understand or appreciate, at least not on this side of eternity.

And that’s one final thing to think about. Your Good Shepherd didn’t stand by idly while sinful beasts and thieves and wolves in sheep’s clothing brought destruction to His flock; a sinful destruction that we, the flock, have justly deserved and brought upon ourselves. Your Good Shepherd could’ve said, *“Forget it! If they’re so hell-bent on making themselves the main course, let ‘em, the stupid sheep. There will be more.”* **But He didn’t.** He went in and fought, just like a Good Shepherd does. This Good Shepherd was willing to fight for one little lost sheep. He was willing to give up everything to go out and save one little wayward and lost sheep. He didn’t take solace in the fact that He had ninety-nine other sheep who could certainly make more sheep. He went after the one. **He gave it all up and fought for you.**

My dear little flock: May God grant you the wisdom and humility of saving, repentant faith so that you may be able to recognize and understand and appreciate just how much your Good Shepherd loves you and actively cares for you. May your ears of faith be opened to always hear and follow the voice of your Good Shepherd, even when it’s spoken through a mangy old sheep-dog like me. May your eyes of faith ever be opened to recognize your Good Shepherd’s love and mercy and care for you, even in the midst of your trials and tribulations. May your eyes of **faith and wisdom** be opened to recognize the love that your Good Shepherd has for you when you feel broken, recognizing that your Good Shepherd is using that brokenness to tend to more important and eternal matters—your life and salvation with Him. My little flock: Repent and rest and enjoy the comfort, peace, and healing that is found only in the pasture and care of your loving and truly Good Shepherd.

To Him alone be all glory, praise, and honor. AMEN