

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul... (Psalm 23:1-3)

Sheep can wander off from the flock and sustain injury or become easy prey. Another frequent danger for sheep is becoming *cast down*. A sheep is *cast down*, or *cast*, when it lies down to rest and shifts its weight so that it rolls slightly, drawing its feet off the ground. When a sheep realizes this predicament it will panic by working its legs and body in an effort to stand up. If help does not come in time, the sheep will die.

A shepherd is well aware of the dangers of *cast* sheep and wandering sheep. He constantly looks for signs of trouble. He will look to the sky for signs of circling buzzards whose eyes are also looking for signs of dinner. The shepherd will frequently count his sheep to insure that none are missing. If there are signs of predators or a missing sheep, the shepherd will immediately go in search of the helpless sheep in order to restore it to the flock under his watchful eye.

There is an interesting human parallel to the sheep that is *cast down*. The human dilemma is that of being 'downcast.' An individual can be going along life's way only to fall into desperate circumstances: job loss, family troubles, financial stress, frustration with fellow Christians, problems at work, death of a loved one, etc. These can bring about a loss of self worth, increased anxiety, a sense of lostness, a burden of guilt, or other negative feelings. It is easy to panic and in frustration lash out at friends and family. These feelings can lead a person into a pit of despair and self-pity. Having given up hope some have even given themselves over to a 'sinning spree.'

Like sheep that wander off, we can easily wander spiritually. There may be no real 'life drama'; we

simply lose focus on the truly important things, or become distracted by the world. Little by little we veer off God's path. When we stop and look up, we can be frightened by our lostness.

We are sheep, prone to wander, and easily frightened by the worries of this life. But our God is the Great Shepherd who restores souls.

A store manager calls over the intercom for the mother of a crying child who has wandered off. Their reunion is a mixture of hugs and kisses along with a tender scolding: "You MUST stay close to mommy," (hug). "I was worried about you," (kiss). "Don't run off from mommy, I love you."

Love and rebuke in the same breath: *Restored*.

God warned Israel of the bold and harsh discipline that he would use if they turned away to other gods. Yet with every level of escalating discipline there was tender encouragement promising that He would accept them when they returned to Him. (Read Leviticus 26.)

Jesus seemed harsh when he rebuked Peter: "Get behind me Satan." He seemed so 'matter-of-fact' when he foretold Peter's denial. Yet Jesus restored his soul as he commissioned Peter with the task of shepherding His sheep.

The father of the prodigal son represents God. The son was always His son; when he left home, when he was lost, when he returned. We are the son.

Our God is the faithful and loving shepherd who watches over us, aware of all external dangers as well as our own personal problems and frustrations. He finds us; He puts us back on our feet. Even then, he throws our arm over His shoulder and he helps us as we first stumble, then walk, and finally regain our strength.

He restores my soul.