

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: Why then this statement . . . *He restoreth my soul?* Surely it would be assumed that anyone in the Good Shepherd's care could never become so distressed in soul as to need restoration. But the fact remains that this does happen. Even David, who was much loved of God, knew what it was to be cast down and dejected. He had tasted defeat in his life and felt the frustration of having fallen under temptation. *Psalms 22:1-2 My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? (2) O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent.* David was acquainted with the bitterness of feeling hopeless and without strength in himself.

In Psalm 42:11 he cries out, *Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me?* Here is a parallel to this passage and caring for sheep and the statement of being “cast down.” This is a shepherd's term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up again by itself. A “cast” sheep is a pathetic sight. Lying on its back, its feet in the air, it flays away frantically struggling to stand up, but without success. This happened a few times with my goats. When it happens, a gentle push to one side and it regains its balance and was off and running again.

The way it happens is this. A heavy, fat, or long fleeced sheep will lie down comfortably in some little depression in the ground. It may roll on its side slightly to stretch out or relax. Suddenly the center of gravity in the body shifts so that it turns on its back far enough that the feet no longer touch the ground. It may feel a sense of panic and start to paw frantically. Frequently this only makes things worse. It rolls over even further to a point it is he can't regain its feet. As it lies there struggling, gases begin to build up in the rumen. As these expand they tend to retard and cut off blood circulation to extremities of the body, especially the legs. If the weather is very hot and sunny a cast sheep can die in a few hours. If it is cool and cloudy and rainy it may survive in this position for several days. However, if the owner does not arrive on the scene within a reasonably short time, the animal will die.

It is not only the shepherd who keeps a sharp eye for cast sheep, but also the predators because a “cast” sheep is easy prey. Phillip Keller in his book entitled A Shepherd's Look at Psalm 23 said, “*Often I would go out early and merely cast my eye across the sky. If I saw the black-winged buzzards circling overhead in their long slow spirals anxiety would grip me. Leaving everything else I would immediately go out into the rough wild pastures and count the flock to make sure every one was well and fit and able to be on its feet.*”

This is part of the picture depicted for us in the magnificent parable of the lost sheep. There were the ninety and nine sheep accounted, but where was the one astray. There is the Shepherd's deep concern; his agonizing search; his longing to find the missing one; and then there is his delight in restoring it not only to its feet but also to the flock as well as to himself.

Keller went on to say, *“Again and again I would spend hours searching for a single sheep that was missing. Then more often than not I would see it at a distance, down on its back, lying helpless. At once I would start to run toward it — hurrying as fast as I could — for every minute was critical. Within me there was a mingled sense of fear and joy: fear it might be too late; joy that it was found at all. As soon as I reached the cast ewe my very first impulse was to pick it up. Tenderly I would roll the sheep over on its side. This would relieve the pressure of gases in the rumen. If she had been down for long I would have to lift her onto her feet. Then straddling the sheep with my legs I would hold her erect, rubbing her limbs to restore the circulation to her legs.”*

Often if a sheep has been “cast” for any length of time, when it started to walk again it would often just stumbled, staggered and collapsed. Perhaps this is why the shepherd that found the lost sheep in ***Luke 15:5 when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.*** This man was happy because of his recovery. In fact, he was so happy that ***{6} when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.***

Well, a sheep that has been severely “cast” will little by little regain its equilibrium. It would start to walk steadily and surely. By and by it would rejoin the others and be given another chance to live a little longer. At such a sigh, the shepherd and others that might be nearby would rejoice. So it is with our Good Shepherd. ***{Lk 15:7} I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.*** So we are told by the psalmist, ***He restoreth my soul!***

On the one hand we see the sheep helpless though otherwise strong, healthy and flourishing; while on the other hand there is the attentive owner quick and ready to come to its rescue. There is a comforting parallel here to the Christian life. Some have the idea that when a child of God falls, when he is frustrated and helpless in a spiritual dilemma, God becomes disgusted, fed-up and even furious with him. But this is not the picture I get. One of the great revelations is that Christ is as our Shepherd. He has the same concern and compassion for “cast” men and women as a shepherd has for “cast” sheep.

When you read the life of Jesus Christ you see Him often as the Good Shepherd picking up "cast" sheep. We see this illustrated by the tenderness, the love, and the patience that He used to restore Peter's soul after his denial. We see this illustrated with the woman caught in adultery when he said, “Go and sin no more.”

So what about me when I may be “cast”? In Psalm 56:13 we are given an accurate commentary on this aspect of the Christian's life ... *thou has delivered my soul from death: wilt not thou deliver my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living.*” Most of us, though we belong to Christ and desire to be under His control and try to allow ourselves to be led by Him, do on occasion find ourselves “cast down.”

We discover that often when we are most sure of ourselves we stumble and fall. Sometimes when we appear to be flourishing in our faith we find ourselves in a situation of utter frustration and futility. Paul in writing to the Christians at Corinth warned them of this danger. *"Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (I Corinthians 10: 12).* As with sheep, so with Christians, some basic principles apply which will help us to grasp the way in we can be "cast down."

1. There is, first of all, the idea of looking for a soft spot. The sheep that chooses the comfortable rounded hollows in the ground in which to lie and often become “cast.” In such a situation it is so easy to roll over on their backs. In the Christian life there is great danger in always looking for the easy place, the comfortable position where there is no hardship, no need for endurance, no demand upon self-discipline.

The time when we think "we have it made," so to speak, is actually when we are at risk. There is for some the discipline of poverty and privation, which can be do us worlds of good. Jesus suggested this to the rich young man who mistakenly assumed he was in a safe position. Sometimes if, I am unwilling to forfeit or forego the soft life, the easy way; then the Good Shepherd may well move me to a pasture where things aren't quite so comfortable—not only for my own good but also His benefit as well.

2. There is the aspect of a sheep simply having too much wool. Often when the fleece becomes very long, and heavily matted with mud, burrs and other debris, it is much easier for a sheep to become “cast”, literally weighed down with its own wool. Figuratively, wool worldly ideas that begin to weigh me down, drag me down, and hold me down.

Whenever a sheep was “cast” because it had too long and heavy a fleece, swift steps were taken to remedy the situation. Most often, the ewe would be sheared clean. This was not always a pleasant process. Sheep do not really enjoy being sheared and it represents some hard work for the shepherd, but it must be done. Actually when it is all over both sheep and owner is relieved. There is no longer the threat of being cast down, while for the sheep there is the pleasure of being set free from a hot, heavy coat. Often the fleece is clogged with filthy mud, burrs, sticks and ticks. What a relief to be rid of it all!

Similarly in dealing with our old self-life, there may come a day when the Master must take us in hand and apply the keen cutting edge of His Word to our lives. This may come in the form of a loving brother or sister. It may be an unpleasant for a time and we may struggle and kick about it. We may get a few cuts and wounds. But what a relief when it's all over. Jesus said (*John 8:32 KJV*) *And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*

Hebrews 12:1 ... let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

3. The third chief cause of "cast" sheep is simply that they are too fat. Over-fat sheep are neither the healthiest nor the most productive, and it is the fattest that most often are "cast". Their weight simply makes it that much harder for them to be agile and nimble on their feet. Of course once a shepherd even suspects that his sheep are becoming "cast" for this reason he will take long-range steps to correct the problem. He will put them on a rigorous ration; they will get less grain and the general condition of the flock will be watched very closely. It is his aim to see that the sheep are strong, sturdy and energetic, not fat, flabby and weak.

Turning to the Christian life, we are confronted with the same sort of problem. It's easy for people that are successful in their careers of having a sense of well-being and self-assurance, which in itself is dangerous. Often when we are most sure of ourselves we are the most prone to fall flat.

In His warning to the church in Revelation 3:17 God points out that though some considered themselves rich and affluent, they were actually in desperate danger. Jesus made the same point in His account of the wealthy farmer who intended to build more and bigger barns but faced utter ruin. Material success is no measure of spiritual health. Nor is apparent affluence any criteria of real godliness. He may well impose on us some sort of "diet" or "discipline" which we may find a bit rough and unpalatable at first. But again we need to reassure ourselves that it is for our own good, because He is our Good Shepherd. In Hebrews 12 we read how God disciplines those He loves. At the time it may prove a tough routine. But the deeper truth is that afterward, it produces a life of calm and tranquility free from the fret and frustration of being cast down like a helpless sheep.

We may rest assured that He will never expect us or ask us to face more than we can stand. But what He does expose us to will strengthen and fortify our faith and confidence in His control. If He is the Good Shepherd we can rest assured that He knows what He is doing. This in and of itself should be sufficient to continually refresh and restore my soul.

Are you under his care tonight? By that I mean, are you a Christian? If not, let us encourage you to do so by believing, repenting, confessing and being baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.