

GOOD SHEPHERDS

We can better understand the Savior and ourselves by observing what He taught about sheep and those who love them.

BY SALLY JOHNSON ODEKIRK
Church Magazines

Have you ever watched a flock of sheep? They mill around, baaing and butting into each other. One sheep starts to wander one way, another goes in the other direction, both seeking food.

Then along comes the lead sheep, wearing a bell that gets their attention, and the flock starts to follow. The shepherd is always there, watching over the flock, rescuing a wayward or injured lamb, guiding them to food and water, and helping the sheep bed down at night in a safe area.

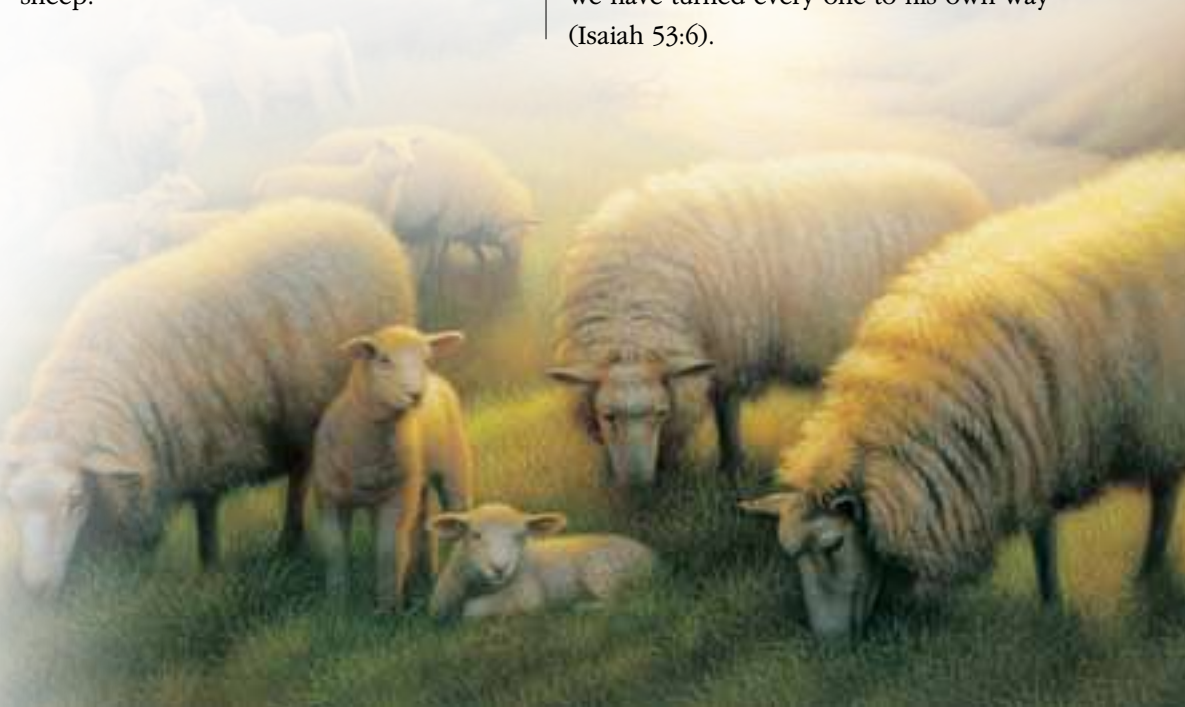
Some of the most tender images in the scriptures are those of the Good Shepherd. Sheep and shepherds were part of everyday life at the time of Christ, and we can learn a lot about the Savior and ourselves by learning about how a shepherd cares for his sheep.

We Are All Sheep

All sheep follow a leader to safety and food because the only natural protection they have is the ability to spot their enemies and run from danger.

Kerry Smith grew up on a sheep ranch in Idaho and helped her father care for their lambs. She remembers that sometimes they would get their heads caught in the wire fencing or fall on their backs in a ditch. “Sheep are absolutely helpless on their backs. They can’t roll over without some assistance. That’s what makes them easy to handle and to shear, but it can also kill them,” she says. “We watch for any that might be in trouble and run to their rescue.”

The prophet Isaiah knew that, like sheep, people can also get into trouble. He wrote, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6).







*When we learn
the qualities
of a true
leader, we become true
spiritual shepherds.*

Shepherds and leaders watch for those in trouble and help them get back on their feet. Kerry puts it this way: “Because we each have weaknesses Heavenly Father can help us ‘get up off our backs’ and resume our lives. Though we must always do our part, He is our protector. He gave us the perfect example of His Only Begotten Son, who is always watching, always guiding, always our Shepherd.”

The Loving Shepherds

Shepherds were an important part of society in ancient Israel. The prophets Abraham, Jacob, and Moses were shepherds, as was King David. Comparisons of leaders to shepherds were common. The prophet Ezekiel wrote, speaking as though he were the Savior, “As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day” (Ezekiel 34:12).

When Jesus spoke of shepherds, His followers knew He was encouraging them to love and care for those around them, like shepherds do for their sheep.

Max Wallentine of Salem, Utah, spent many years raising sheep. He says, “A kind, loving shepherd is always on guard for the sheep that leave the flock. He is also alert to the attack of a predator.”

One of today’s shepherds is Sister Susan W. Tanner, Young Women general president. She says, “If you think of a flock of sheep, they are needy. They need someone who will lead them, who will know them, and who will enfold them with love. The Father sent His Son to show us the way, lead us, and enfold us in His love. We have His example, and we feel of His love.”

Charles W. Dahlquist, Young Men general president, reflects on the example of

the Savior as a leader: “I continually marvel at His understanding and loving kindness. Sometimes we just need to feel His love, and it is there. Each soul is precious to Him, and it gives Him a fulness of joy when His sheep hearken to His voice (see 3 Nephi 27:30). He wants us to become undershepherds and share in that joy.”

Leading the Sheep

When Brother Dahlquist was a mission president, he met a shepherd with his sheep near Kassel, Germany. He asked the shepherd if he led the sheep or if he followed them. The shepherd said, “It all depends. If it’s someplace they’ve been before, the sheep lead and I follow. If it’s someplace new, I lead and they follow me.” Wise leaders know this and set the example and then let others lead. When that happens, new leaders gain the confidence they need to apply those same skills.

We learn about love and leadership when we serve in quorums and class presidencies and have the responsibility to strengthen faith, build character, have fun, and fellowship others. We are also entitled to inspiration to help those in our quorums and classes. Sister Tanner points out that as we learn to reach out in friendship, care for other class members, and plan activities with individuals in mind, we learn the qualities of a true leader: to teach, testify, and lift. We become true spiritual shepherds.

Brother Dahlquist reminds youth in leadership positions of the importance of caring for everyone in their quorum or class. “It’s the lost ones that take the effort—those who are wandering that need our help. Leadership is understanding what the Good Shepherd would do: look beyond who comes and seek after those who are straying.”

The Savior taught this principle: “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?”

“And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

“And 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” (Luke 15:4–6).

A SHEPHERD’S WORLD

Some of the words in the scriptures that refer to sheep and shepherds become clearer with explanation. Here are a few of their meanings:*

Sheepfold (see John 10:9)

“A shallow cave was a good place of safety, and a wall was often built partly across the cave mouth to form an enclosure in front of it. The wall was made of local stones and was topped with thorns. . . . The shepherd lay down across the one opening, effectively becoming a door for the sheep.”

Cloak (see Jeremiah 43:12)

“The shepherd’s cloak is made of sheepskin or material woven of wool, goat hair or camel hair and protects him from cold and rain. It serves as his blanket at night. An inner pouch is large enough to hold a newborn lamb when it has to be helped over rough places, or when because of sickness or injury, it has to be taken to a place of shelter.”

Rod and Staff (see Psalm 23:4)

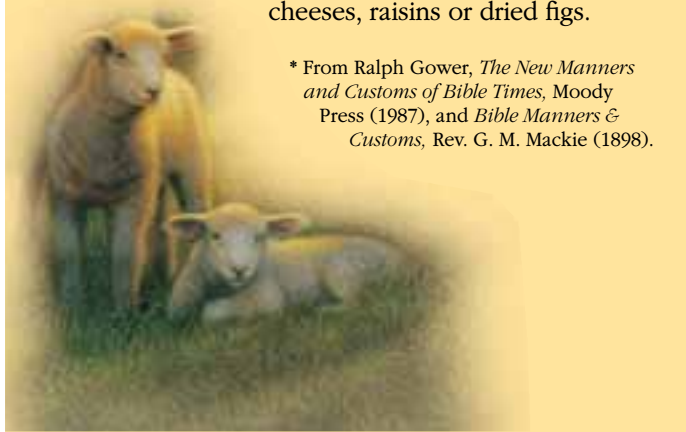
The rod is a club made out of a straight young tree uprooted for this purpose, the bulb at the beginning of the root is trimmed to make the head of the club.

The staff is about six feet long and made of wood; it may have a crook at one end. It can be used as a weapon of defense, but it is also used to help the shepherd get around easily in hilly or rough country, and it helps control the sheep.

Scrip (see 1 Samuel 17:40)

The scrip is a bag made of tanned skin where the shepherd usually put his stock of bread, olives, cheeses, raisins or dried figs.

* From Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, Moody Press (1987), and *Bible Manners & Customs*, Rev. G. M. Mackie (1898).





A good leader has the ability both to lead a big group and to touch the lives of each individual.

Loving and Guiding the Sheep

Elder John R. Lasater, formerly of the Seventy (1987–92), told of an incident that occurred while he was traveling in Morocco. A car had injured one of the lambs belonging to a shepherd, and according to local law, the shepherd was entitled to 100 times its value. His interpreter said, “But the old shepherd will not accept the money. They never do because of the love [they have] for each of [the] sheep.” Elder Lasater then observed the old shepherd pick up the injured lamb, place it in a pouch in the front of his robe, stroke its head, and call it by name. The interpreter told him, “All of his sheep have a name, for he is their shepherd, and the good shepherds know each one of their sheep by name.”

Elder Lasater continued, “Do we understand the personal nature of the shepherd’s call? . . . Do they know us as true shepherds who love them, who willingly and freely give time and attention to their needs, and in that marvelous process, instill the confidence and security so greatly needed in God’s children today?” (“Shepherds of Israel,” *Ensign*, May 1988, 74–75).

Brother Dahlquist says that as we look after quorum or class members, the Good Shepherd will, through the Holy Ghost, prompt us about what we need to do for them. It may be a feeling that we need to visit someone or just call them on the telephone. That is what President Hinckley has taught—that everyone needs a friend, an opportunity to serve, and spiritual nourishment (see *Ensign*, Oct. 2006, 4).

Serving Them One by One

Sister Tanner reminds us that when Jesus visited the Nephites after His Resurrection, He invited them to come to Him one by one to feel the prints of the nails in His

hands and feet (see 3 Nephi 11:14–15). “The Savior in His individual ministry called people to Him one by one. A shepherd may have a flock of 100 or more, but he knows each one and goes after the one missing. A good leader has the ability to touch the whole big group and at the same time helps them feel of his individual love and concern. That’s what President Hinckley does for youth today. People love President Hinckley, and when I ask the youth why, they say, ‘Because I feel that he loves me.’ That’s the type of shepherd he is.”

Sister Tanner adds: “Leaders or shepherds in the gospel can follow the Savior’s example by working with the one. That individual, one-on-one ministering is a very important part of shepherding.”

Brother Dahlquist says, “To truly follow the Savior, we need to know His voice and learn how He dealt with others—the sick, the lame, and the struggling. Then we need to go and do likewise.”

The Good Shepherd

Centuries before the Savior’s birth, Isaiah prophesied: “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom” (Isaiah 40:11).

Jesus Christ was the Good Shepherd when He was on earth. He loved and served those around Him and, by His example, taught us to love and serve others. He is still the Good Shepherd. He knows us by name and calls us to come to Him for comfort and peace. **NE**

For more on shepherds, read Ezekiel 34; President Henry B. Eyring, “Feed the Lambs” (*Ensign*, Feb. 2008, 4); and Jane B. Malan, “Summer of the Lambs” (*Ensign*, Nov. 1989, 78).



Our Savior Jesus Christ is ‘the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep’ (John 10:11).

“Some years ago I went to a national championship and watched shepherds perform in competition. I learned an unforgettable lesson. The true shepherd does not run to and fro, chasing the sheep. He walks among them and gains their trust. He teaches his sheepdogs and gives them assignments. Some will lead, and some will be behind. He then leads his sheep and goes before them. Along the way he uses voice and hand signals to direct his trusty dogs. From his vantage point, he watches over the sheep and leads them where they need to go.

“So it is with the true Shepherd: ‘The sheep hear his voice: and he calleth [them] by name, and leadeth them out’ (John 10:3).”

Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “The Calling and Responsibilities of a Bishop,” *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, June 21, 2003, 8.*