

# THE GOOD SHEPHERD

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If God tries to save us and then gives up when He sees how difficult we are, that is bad news. If He has made the path to heaven difficult and the path to perdition easy, that is also bad news.

Deep down, how do you feel about God? One way to find out would be to ask yourself whether this statement is true or false: "It's easy to be lost and hard to be saved." If you answer True, it is likely that your basic idea of God is uncomfortably like that of the one-talent man, who dug a hole and buried His wealth in the ground. When the Lord finally confronted him, he retorted, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid" Matthew 25:24, 25, RSV.

Many people today fear God and view Him as a petty "hard man," who lets it be difficult for us to be saved, but easy for us to be lost. And if that's true, then God sits by unconcerned while the vast majority of earth's inhabitants are allowed to be eternally lost, unwarned. He lets the path to hell be a superhighway down which you coast effortlessly into eternal ruin. On the other hand, He hides the way to heaven so cleverly, with every conceivable obstacle fiendishly built into it to mislead as many people as possible. And God stands back in the shadows, content to watch the masses slide down the slippery path to perdition, while only a mere handful have what it takes to thread their way

through that maze and successfully make it to heaven. And this is supposed to be "good news"?

No one overtly denies the "Good Shepherd" idea—that Christ actively seeks and saves the lost rather than waiting for us to seek and find Him; but the Elijah message of the gospel has far better Good News than "we" have thought.

No one among us today will overtly deny the parable of the Good Shepherd. It's a given. But the idea seldom gets through clearly.

For example, consider the basic theme that permeates so many of the messages heard at revivals and the sort: in order to be saved, there are three things we must do: (a) read the Bible, (b) pray, and (c) witness. The theme is played almost endlessly. "Maintain your relationship with the Lord," which means get up in the morning, read something devotional, and pray. And the cure for spiritual maladies is "work for others."

True, 100%. Can't be said too often. But a few weeks after camp meeting, we get busy again, and we're back in the same old problem.

"Maintaining that relationship" with the Lord is the problem we find. Once we get far enough along that we have a "relationship," it's commonly understood that maintaining it is the believer's job. And that seems to make good sense, for the Good Shepherd has done His duty; it's only fair now that we do ours. There have to be some works.

And here's where often we fall down. We forget or we get too busy, and then it seems the Lord is far away. And of course it's all our fault, isn't it? So, . . . enter guilt.

The natural human state, apart from a distinct miracle, is “enmity with God.” Romans 8:7, NEB. Anybody who thinks he never has had this problem is misinformed, for “we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” Ephesians 2:3, RSV. A good way to start getting this buried “wrath” out of our systems is to discover the truth that it is indeed hard to be lost, and easy to be saved. God is a much more likeable character than we have been prone to think, and His good news is a lot better than we have thought.

There ought not to be any question about something if Jesus says it plainly. Yet multitudes who say they believe the Bible balk at one of His clearest utterances: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:28-30. Human nature seems intent on believing that His yoke is hard. Many feel that being a true Christian is a fiendishly difficult undertaking, a heroic achievement that only a few people can ever hope to realize. Naturally such an idea discourages multitudes who may want to follow Jesus.

Almost everywhere I go I meet parents who tell me sadly that one or more of their children are no longer in the church. They were raised in the church, went to Sabbath school, even church school, Christian academies, etc., but now have drifted out into the world. And these parents invariably tell me they are trusting to that promise in

Isaiah 49:25 that says, “I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children.” Precious promise; but is there something we can do to cooperate with the Lord in this wonderful work of reclaiming lost children?

The father of the prodigal son was a wonderful man, but still his son rebelled. So we are not assured of 100% success, necessarily. Even Jesus lost one of His 12 disciples, and actually almost lost Peter, and the others forsook Him and fled. But there is a reason why we lose so many people, and the problem can be corrected.

The problem is the same one that ancient Israel had continually: the effects of the old covenant. The old covenant was the promise of the people to do everything just right when they promised in Exodus 19:8, “All that the Lord hath spoken, we will do.” For generations, we have always assured our children, “Yes, the Lord will bless you; He will do this or that for you, provided you do your part!” Thus the basic idea that gets across to them is that the Lord is like a policeman or a CHP officer; He won’t bother you if you keep out of trouble.

It’s up to you to initiate a relationship with the Lord, and to maintain it; and if you don’t, then He backs off and leaves you to yourself. The emphasis is on what YOU do to save yourself, not on what HE has done and is doing to save you. What is the inevitable result? Dependence on self, and that leads to alienation from Christ. And then—wandering away. Let’s hope it’s not too late to proclaim the New Covenant to the children who have lost their way, but in the meantime let’s give the New Covenant to the children of today! They must know that Christ is their Saviour 100%; nothing but that Good News will reconcile their alienated hearts to Him.

How does the Good Shepherd seeking and finding His lost sheep translate into practical day-by-day living? If the Savior gives us a good faith-relationship with Himself, shouldn't it be fair for us now to "maintain" that "relationship" by (a) Bible study, (b) prayer, and (c) witnessing? If the Lord gives you a new car, isn't it fair that you "maintain" it by changing the oil, renewing the brake pads, paying the insurance, etc. etc.?

Yes, of course, only fair. But a lot of cars get dilapidated by not being "maintained," the new car thrill wears off; and also lots of people lose their "relationship with the Lord" by neglect and forgetfulness. So we have "revival" campaigns at various intervals. And of course, all that is good.

It sounds like such reasonable good sense that millions know no other way to be Christians. But when you think it through, isn't this the essence of the "by faith plus by works" idea? We're afraid of any Good News that's better than that lest making the Good News too good might lull us to sleep and we'll forget to keep the law. The "faith plus works" idea becomes immensely popular because it seems to be the only way people can stay "faithful." (The Old Covenant is loath to give way to the New Covenant.)

If the Good Shepherd has risked His own life to save the lost sheep, doesn't it make good common sense that He require the sheep now to walk its way home? Yes, of course, that's only fair; but that's not what the parable says: "When He hath found it, He layeth it on His shoulders, rejoicing" (Luke 15:5). Paul says in Philippians: "I am sure

that God, who began this good work in you, will carry it on until it is finished on the Day of Jesus Christ" (1:7, GNB). What does that mean? Lazy, do-nothing religion?

No; it means that through the Holy Spirit the Good Shepherd who initiated this good "relationship" now seeks to maintain it. His love is not only a finding love, it's also a keeping love. The Holy Spirit is a Person who keeps convicting us of "sin. . . . of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:7-11). Be careful: don't drown His voice. That's where our problem starts.

Even Jesus when he was with us in the flesh needed His Father to wake Him up "morning by morning . . . to hear as the learned." (Does the Father love you less? It seems fair and good sense to say No, He loves His Son more; but the amazing truth is He loves us just as much!).

But Jesus did not resist His Father's awakening calls—as we do so often: "I was not rebellious, neither turned away back" (Isa. 50:4, 5).

Mr. Laodicea, you can't save yourself even one percent. But you can LET Christ save you, you can "LET this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus," you can "LET the word of Christ dwell in you richly," etc. (Phil. 2:5; Col. 3:16). You can stop resisting Him.

Someone comments about getting up early in the morning to spend some "quality time" with the Lord—prayer and Bible study so as to maintain your "relationship" with Him. But then you couldn't help noticing how disheveled the house was and how messy the kitchen, so you felt you had to straighten

things up, and *voilà!* the “quality time” was gone and the burdens of the day were upon you again. “So am I losing out with God?”

Let’s “walk softly” here, like repentant Ahab. There are times when a wise doctor keeps a patient in a coma on intravenous feeding; but normally a healthy person eats because he’s hungry, not because of stern cold duty. Your problem may not be that your 24-hour day is too short (that would be God’s fault). Probably good sincere people have pounded into you a wrong idea of God (maybe even from the pulpit). God is not waiting for you to maintain a relationship with Him; He wants you to know He is maintaining a relationship with you. It all begins with His initiative, not yours. He wants you saved more than you want to be.

When Jesus came, He changed our ideas about His Father. The Good Shepherd is not waiting for His lost sheep to find Him; He is seeking the sheep (Luke 15:3-32). The text about “seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near” (Isa. 55:6) needs a clearer translation. The Hebrew verb there for “seek” is not the common one, looking for a lost object; it means “pay attention to Me because I am near! I’m not far away, ever!”

This idea of working hard to maintain our relationship with the Lord is a subtle Old Covenant idea that has crept in. When you begin to grasp His seeking love, His cross, you will “hunger and thirst” for His “truth of the gospel.” It will expel your love for amusement; it will heal you of your Bible boredom. But we “walk softly”: if you are in a

spiritual coma, yes, force yourself to read your Bible and pray. But please . . . believe the New Covenant.

We hear and read at length about the need for us to develop and maintain a “relationship” with Jesus. The problem is that many people don’t know how to do that. They feel frustrated that their (a) reading the Bible, (b) their prayers, and (c) their “witnessing” don’t get anywhere. They wonder frankly, HOW do you build or maintain a “relationship” that’s one-sided? “Jesus doesn’t say anything to us!” And their Bible study turns out to be boring. Some get discouraged and stop trying.

Many times our Sabbath School lesson speaks at length about the need for us to develop and maintain a “relationship” with Jesus. The problem is that many people don’t know how to do that. They feel frustrated that their (a) reading the Bible, (b) their prayers, and (c) their “witnessing” don’t get anywhere. They wonder frankly, HOW do you build or maintain a “relationship” that’s one-sided? “Jesus doesn’t say anything to us!” And their Bible study turns out to be boring. Some get discouraged and stop trying. What they need is Good News that is better than they have thought it is.

Here are three brief points of how good that Good News is: (1) Jesus isn’t waiting for you to initiate or even “maintain” a “relationship” with him. He Himself has taken the initiative to build it: “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,” He says ever so plainly in John 15:16. What He is wondering about is how He can build a one-sided relationship with YOU! He has made all the advances; your job

is to respond—which is what it means “to believe.” He did all the loving and the giving FIRST (take another look at John 3:16).

(2) He seeks to maintain the relationship through the daily, even hourly prompting of the Holy Spirit: “Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left” (Isa. 30:21). “The Father . . . will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God” (John 14:16, GNB). Yes, that’s true; believe it. He WILL stay with you unless YOU take the initiative to drive Him off. Yes, the ball is in your court.

While it is true that there have been many prayers offered that God will richly bless you, those prayers are not what motivates God to help you. He already is motivated to help you because His love for you does not depend on other people praying for you. You may not understand His providences, but for sure “all things work together for good” to you.

He says, “My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him.” If it would truly help you by giving you lasting happiness and self-respect, He would gladly make you a millionaire; but if He allows you to be chastened in order to build solid character into your soul, that is not one whit less an evidence of His love. God has ordained government, even though there are flaws in it; don’t get discouraged—God also overrules human government for your good and He will use this experience to teach you and train you.

Your job is to stop worrying about your future, stop letting an enemy of your soul torment you with the fear that your life is ruined.

The common idea about the realities of life is that all men are born doomed to be lost unless they take the initiative to do something right first. In other words, the common idea is that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross doesn’t do anybody any good until he does something about it, first. If you are saved at last, the idea is, it is due to your own initiative; and if you are lost at last, that will be due to God’s initiative. The real truth is that if anyone is saved at last, it will be due entirely to God’s initiative, and if anyone is lost at last it will be due to his own initiative in resisting or rejecting what Christ has already given him. And everybody is not born doomed to be lost. He is born to be saved, and will be, unless he does something to counter or thwart what God is actively doing for him. (This is Rom. 3:23, 24; 5:18; 1 Tim. 4:10; 2 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 2:9; 1 Jn. 2:2), etc).

This boils down to the Good News idea that it is actually hard to be lost and it is easy to be saved, if one understands the “truth of the gospel.” This blows some people’s minds, for they have always thought it was the opposite. And if one has the idea that Christ has only made a provision for us to be saved, that His sacrifice is only “available” for us, that it does us no good unless we do something right first, inevitably the idea pervades our minds that God is standing back in the shadows leaving us to our own foolish ways, and doing nothing to help us until we first get our lives straightened out and

our act together. And believing that, many people say, “So what! God couldn’t care less if I don’t bother Him; I’m not His favorite, I’m a failure, and here’s nuthin’ goin’ nowhere.” The reality is that He is actively taking us by the hand each day and saying, “Come on, let’s go to heaven, and while we’re at it, let’s have a heaven here on earth first.” The only way not to be led there all the way is to resist Him, to beat Him off, to slap Him down.

Please let me know if you get this. I remember you, for I am your former pastor. I have two daughters both of whom need the grace of God, and I realize that since One died for all, then it follows logically and rationally, that if He had not died, all would be dead. So, apart from the grace of Christ, I belong in prison right now. Worse than that, I belong in the grave. But He took my grave and gave me His life instead. The only decent thing I can do is to give my heart and life to Him.

That’s not hard to do; it’s easy, once one begins to have an inkling of how He gave Himself for each of us.

“Why Did Jesus Have to Die?” Theologians have argued about that for centuries. They have left many confused.

Some of us have answered glibly, “Our sins made Him die.” And you’ll get an A+ for that answer. Easy to say.

You can argue all night but the simple fact remains—flesh and blood people killed Him. It wasn’t that He *had* to die—the public couldn’t stand to have Him around any more. Wait a moment: we’re not denying that He *had* to die—the point is

that it wasn’t the Father who killed Him; and it wasn’t the devil, bad as he is. People killed Him. And that’s what you and I are, people.

Nobody would ever have been killed if sin had not come into this planet; sin is what kills people. And Jesus “became” sin, was “made to be sin,” gave Himself up to become the embodiment of sin, took the blame for every evil deed that any sin-crazed human has ever committed. God “hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21).

From then on, nature simply took its course. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23); and since He “became sin,” death had to take over. Every evil, hateful, pornographic, selfish thought that anyone has ever indulged, He “became” it. It was hateful to Him, yes, but far more hateful than we have imagined. It was all so hateful to him that it killed Him. The Creator, Redeemer of the universe takes this hateful thing called sin into His own bosom, not that He ever loved it but because He loved us.

His death that sin caused was not the “first” which is a mere unconscious state we call sleep. The death that sin brought Him was the second, the one that He could not see through. “Hope did not present to Him His coming forth a conqueror.”

It is likened to His drinking a cup of the most bitter quinine-like substance imaginable (one tiny sip turns your stomach upside down); He gulped it all down, right to the last drop. It all meant that His Father had turned His back on Him forever; He was alone in a dark, endless universe, utterly hopeless, sensing He was a total failure forever. No other human soul in all eternity has ever drunk that cup

down. Utterly lethal. But many have tasted it; they know their hours of despair.

Don't wonder that sin killed Him. If sin is what you love, God is not going to beat you senseless in a total divine rage; the sin you love will do the job. What it did to Him, it will have to do to you.

As sure as the sun rises tomorrow morning, the Holy Spirit will in love bring to your soul a supernatural conviction of sin. Welcome Him; drop everything to listen. What a thousand psychiatrists can't do for us, the Holy Spirit will do in a few moments' time.

The lost lamb is wedged in the thorn bush on a dangerous cliff that wild stormy night. Will it rejoice when it is rescued by the self-sacrificing Good Shepherd? or will it squirm and resist and fight its Rescuer? The parable didn't say. It's for us to complete the story, for the lost little lamb has resisted its Shepherd now for many, many years.