



*Easter 3*

# THE NEW SHOFAR

the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.  
As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock so will I look after my sheep  
Ezekiel 34

## *Men and women of faith have hope in God as our Shepherd*

In the Old Testament God was called a shepherd, and God's people the flock. Perhaps the most popular example of this is Psalm 23 where the psalmist sings that the shepherd leads him to *green pastures near refreshing waters*. The shepherd *guards him in right paths* and *protects him from evil*. God says, *I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest. . . . The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal (Ezekiel 34:15-16)*. It was an image that filled the people with hope. With God as their Shepherd, they could rely on the divine promises of salvation and peace.

## *We are God's treasures!*

Sheep were an indicator of personal wealth, both in the Old and New Testament. In Genesis, God established his Israeli nation through one man, Abraham, who was a herder. Scripture tells us that *"the Lord [had] blessed [Abraham] greatly, and he [had] become great. He [gave] him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys"* (**Genesis 24:35**). This is one of the reasons shepherds went to such lengths to protect and care for their sheep. They were extremely valuable. This would have been in the mind of Jesus in using that image. We are precious sheep in God's eyes.

## *Sacrificial Sheep for the forgiveness of sin:*

With the Exodus, we begin to encounter a different kind of sheep: the perfect, spotless lamb whose blood acts as an atonement for sin. We see this in the Passover (**Exodus 12:5-6**). This is an important transformation. Sheep, in addition to being a wealth indicator, were now linked to sacrifice. They were involved in the re-establishment of the bond between a Holy God and sinful man, a sign of the covenant God set in place in choosing Israel as his flock.

This function of the lamb of sacrifice also absorbed into itself the killing of the lamb on the eve of the escape of the Hebrew people from Egypt. The head of the household was to slaughter the lamb at twilight, and apply some of its blood to the tops and sides of the doorframe of the house. According to **Exodus 12** God said that when He saw the lamb's blood on the doorframe of a house, He would *"pass over"* that home and not permit *"the destroyer"* (**Exodus 12:23**) to enter. *Any home without the blood of the lamb would have their firstborn son struck down that night (Exodus 12:12-13)*. In that way, the blood of the lamb took on salvific symbolism, of the Shepherds work of setting them free and leading them to green pastures. That is who God is and what God does. This was their foundation in hope.,

## *Jesus the new Shepherd of God's People*

With the coming of Jesus as the Lamb of God, this old imagery took on a new life for he was sent by God as the sacrificial lamb so that sins might be forgiven. He is the Good Shepherd who cares for the flock given into his care by his Father. He is the only one who can draw them into the embrace of God, the only Way they can enter into eternal life and experience the abundance of divine blessings, both here in this life and in the world to come.



This belief in Jesus as the Good Shepherd was taken up early in Christian history. One of the oldest images we have of Jesus depicts Christ as the Good Shepherd rather than as the crucified Saviour. This image, painted on the walls of the St. Callisto catacomb in Rome (c.150 AD), shows Jesus carrying a young animal on his shoulder. Why the popularity of this image? Why not the cross?

Partly it is because the early faith community understood how the ministry of Jesus was nothing other than the ongoing saving works of God that had begun with the call and sending of Abraham. As God was the Shepherd of Israel, so now the Risen Christ is the Good Shepherd of the reconstituted Israel – the Christian community. Men and women of faith live under this heavenly shepherding with all that comes with being sheep under a shepherd. God was their hope, as he had been the hope of Israel. They could trust in God, rely on the promisers of God and be secure in the knowledge that they were being shepherded. Given the hostile environment in which they were living their faith lives, this reassurance would have been of paramount importance. They were the reconstituted Israel, reconstituted in Christ and all of the Old Testament promises and divine reassurances were their inheritance. To live the cross, to give witness to the Risen Saviour they needed to be shepherded and in the Holy Spirit, this is what God continues to do for us.

### **There can only be a single Good Shepherd**

Those early Christians struggled to live their faith lives in a world abounding in shepherds of all kinds. Some promised wealth, others power and many more a life of licentiousness and self-satisfaction. They lived daily under the threat of Caesar the warrior king, the head of an empire that could crush the Church with a simple nod. What Christians sought was a reassurance that all God promised would being fulfilled, was now being fulfilled all around them. The world was not going to provide the “food” they needed, the guidance vital for a full and blessed life; was not going to comfort, secure and bring them home.

Only a Heavenly Shepherd was able to give them an enduring life, life even in suffering death. He was the symbol that spoke to them with urgency and enabled them to avoid the subtle temptations of the wolves that abounded. He was the gate, the only way into a life under the sovereign rule of Christ. Living intimately united with Christ our Shepherd is the

guarantee we seek that our life has meaning, purpose, a goal and that faith unites us with others.