

The Shulamite's Experience of Shepherding

Part 2 - *Feed Your Little Goats*

*If you do not know, O fairest among women,
Follow in the footsteps of the flock,
And feed your little goats
Beside the shepherds' tents.*

In part 1, we investigated the question that the Shulamite woman asked her Beloved. She wanted to know where he feeds his flock in order to be with him as he works. This week, we'll focus on Solomon's response to the Shulamite. King Solomon must have been so pleased that she had taken an interest in his work because in his response he called her "fairest among women." Yet, puzzlingly, he doesn't give a direct answer to her question. He doesn't simply tell her where he feeds his flock. "If you do not know," he says, "follow in the footsteps of the flock and feed your little goats beside the shepherds' tents."

King Solomon can't give a definitive answer, perhaps because the flock is always moving, so he gives instructions on how to find them. One of the instructions is for the Shulamite to feed her little goats. This was a striking phrase to me. Why "little goats" and not "little lambs"? In the Bible, lambs are a symbol of the Lord (John 1:29) and of believers (John 21:15). However, goats are painted negatively in the Bible at times, notably in Matthew 25 where Jesus tells a parable of the Son of Man separating the "righteous" ("sheep") from the "cursed" ("goats").

I read this section of verses in a stage where I really wanted someone to care for. Just one person to shepherd and see grow. I'd watch others shepherd people who were actively seeking God, charismatic, and fun to hang around. That was the kind of person I was looking to shepherd, and although I didn't realize it, I was closed to any other kind of opportunity to shepherd, or thought it didn't count. I was so specific in what I was looking for in a person: someone intelligent, someone similar to me except maybe a little younger, perfectly open, with just the right kinds of doubts that I could help them get through, a certain mild kind of struggle that would be easy to solve.

It's no wonder I didn't think there was anyone to shepherd! Actually, if I opened my eyes to everyone around me, there were many, many people I had met in the gospel, in the church, or in life in general who needed shepherding. When I read this verse, I realized that I was looking for some perfect "lamb," but King Solomon tells the Shulamite to care for her little "goats."

This might seem comical, to call some people lambs and others goats, but that was truly the way I had been looking at people! It's like the Lord Jesus was saying through these verses, "I don't care what you think of them. I don't care if, to you, they are lowly or difficult. I want you to be faithful to care for them."

The person God has placed next to you may be years older than you, may have lots of problems, may not be able to articulate what they're going through, may be really hard to talk to, or may seem totally closed. Actually, when we realize that these are the very people the Lord is bringing salvation to, then our heart is opened. We can be full of love for people who are different from us. We realize that we are all "goats" who need God's life and love.

So after this verse spoke to me, I started really investing to spend time with a girl I had met on campus a few months before. I had been spending time with her, but I basically never felt like I was shepherding her. We'd meet up on campus and hang out, but it felt a little strange and unconventional. We'd walk around the perimeter of campus because she vaped and needed to do it outside. We'd talk about everything everyone else was doing in her circle. Whenever I brought up God, she'd go quiet. It was hard to carry a conversation with her unless it was about herself or her life. As time went on, I learned that she was mentally and emotionally unstable. I thought maybe she hung out with me because she just wanted someone to talk to. The more we talked, the more I felt like she didn't have the mental and emotional capacity to comprehend the gospel, let alone receive it. I didn't really feel invested because I didn't know what I was doing or if it was even worthwhile.

Then one night, after reading the Song of Songs verses, I was praying for her without really knowing what to pray. During the prayer, I felt like the Lord was telling me how much of a *precious gem* she is. I remember that specific image. She is a treasure to Him because she's a human being, created by Him, whom He came to save.

From then on, my mindset changed. I started to really care for her. I started by being available. I would prioritize her phone calls, even if she would just rant about something that I could do nothing to help. I tried to find out all about her life--what she was doing, who she was dating, who she was hanging out with. I would do my best to make it to group hangouts with her friends. I started reading the Bible with her on the phone, even if I had to wait until 11:30 pm for her to answer. Through all of this, I started to feel connected with her, to care about how she was doing, to be joyful when she was joyful. I felt like I tasted the care that the Lord Jesus has for the helpless. All people are in need of His care. He would go so far to care for someone, even if in my eyes that person doesn't fit some "standard" or "expectation" that I have.

Perhaps you desire to enter into the experience of shepherding. Perhaps you've been praying to become more of a shepherd. But, if you have a certain image of what shepherding looks like, may God adjust your heart from being too narrow. May he help us all see the people who are to our right, our left, in front, and behind. May our eyes be opened to the wallflowers, the rejected, the uncomely, both in the world and even right in our church gatherings. May we be people who faithfully shepherd the "goats" and thus begin to enter into what shepherding is really about--outpouring the care that Christ has for *all* people.