

Part 3 - *Beside the Shepherds' Tents*

*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 this series, we've been studying this sweet interaction between the Shulamite and King Solomon. We've looked at the Shulamite's question, *where do you feed your flock?* Her question shows us her interest in King Solomon and the work he is about. We also started to look at King Solomon's response, which so far has revealed his delight in the Shulamite and his instructions to her to feed her little goats.

We haven't yet looked at the last phrase, "beside the shepherds' tents." These phrases are a part of Solomon's instructions to the Shulamite for her to find out where he feeds his flock. His full instruction is for her to "follow in the footsteps of the flock, and feed [her] little goats beside the shepherds' tents." Out of all the goodness in these verses, that last phrase, *beside the shepherds' tents*, is the phrase that has struck me most and has most recently affected my life.

In our hometown, my husband Austin and I have spent a lot of time with older Christians because few younger people meet with our congregation. Most of the Christians are around our grandparents' age. The "shepherds" in these Song of Songs verses remind me of them--our spiritual grandparents and parents who have known the Lord longer than us and experienced living for Him longer. All of us probably know some older brothers and sisters in Christ who are like this, either in our community or in our congregation. We have different levels of relationships with them, and we may come to value spending time with them, hearing stories from them, and serving with them.

But have we been by their *tents*?

It's interesting that the verse doesn't say, "beside the shepherds *while they are working in the field.*" Or even "beside the shepherds *while they are feeding their sheep.*" These would make more sense to me. Why shouldn't the Shulamite go where the shepherds are taking their sheep? She'd learn more that way. She'd learn which pasture has the richest grass and which streams have the freshest water. She'd learn where the wolves live, where the lion's den is, where there is quicksand, where the rock crumbles away from the cliff. Isn't that what we all want to know? What do we do with our little goats? Someone should just give us a pattern to follow, a list of do's and don't's, and tell us how to shepherd.

But this isn't how King Solomon instructs the Shulamite. He wants her to take her little goat and lead it gently over to the shepherds' *tents*. So what are the shepherds' tents? I don't think that *tents* exactly equals *houses*, although bringing someone over to an older Christian's house could be a great first step in bringing them by their tent. But it's not just a matter of *place*. It's also a matter of *life*. It's not enough just to be in someone's *house*. We also need to be in their *life*.

This is why I make the distinction: Austin and I have gone over to some houses, and the entire time has been filled with stories of the past--how the Lord moved in this year or what the church did in that year. Austin and I have left those times grateful that we learned some history of the church, but we also didn't feel like we got to know the ones we were visiting. We could have investigated more into their life. Do they have hobbies? What projects are they working on? What do they like to do with their kids? What do they like to do with their spouse?

If our own interaction with the shepherds is only regarding work, or the field, how can we feel comfortable hanging around their tents, let alone bringing someone else around? If our only interactions with older Christians are in meetings, in small groups, or in serving the church, we might not have an automatic reaction of wanting to bring people by their tents. It might feel invasive or uncomfortable or imposing. Tents are a very personal location. Tents are where people live, where people are with their families, where people rest and enjoy life. Yes, it is personal, but according to these verses, it's also what we need, and what our little goats need.

It's just so striking to me that King Solomon talks about the shepherds' tents. How much we need to be involved in the lives of the more experienced Christians around us. Until we learn how to be beside the shepherds' tents ourselves, it will be hard for us to bring our little goats there. Our little goats need to be fed, and what we need are shepherds who will open up their tents to us.

When I realized what this verse was saying, I actually started feeling relieved. Having grown up in a church setting and now living as an adult with the same people who practically raised me, when I would disagree with someone about a spiritual matter or serving-related matter, I would feel terrible. I would feel like I was so wrong. I even felt like, maybe the church life isn't for me. It's too hard to go along. I must be spiritually off here.

What I didn't realize was that I was just getting closer to their tents. When you get into someone's personal space, it gets messy. In a family, siblings know each other so well that they know each other's downfalls, they don't always see eye to eye, and they have to work to resolve conflict. When we're beside the shepherds' tents, it's the same way. Sometimes you simply disagree on how to feed the goats, and you have to talk it through until you work it out.

When you aren't by someone's tent, it's easy to get along with them. But the closer you get, the more times you don't see eye-to-eye, the more times you embarrass yourselves in front of each other, the more times you have to work through hurt feelings. This might be scary, but it's worth it. If you find that you're keeping people at arm's length, especially older Christians, just delve into the life of someone next to you. Do an activity with them. Hang out with them. Be in their life and bring them into yours. Laugh with them, share a meal with them, and hear about the victories and defeats in their current life. Don't just listen to their stories of the past. No, go by their tents. Get to know their lives now. Don't be afraid of the place near the shepherds' tents.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we fostered relationships like this with each other? What if we had so many spiritual grandparents, parents, and mentors who we knew so intimately that it was so natural for us to bring our friends to meet them, and that when we brought them over, they would even feel like they've gained a grandparent/parent/mentor as well.

We who are interested in the Lord's work, we who want to get involved with what He is doing in people, may we remember His instructions through the words of King Solomon to his beloved: follow in the footsteps of the flock, and feed your little goats beside the shepherds' tents.