

Why Are You Cast Down, O My Soul?

By Wendy Wood



In Psalm 42 and 43, the sons of Korah repeatedly say the phrase, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?” These men are using a phrase familiar to shepherds. A “cast down” sheep is one who has fallen over onto his back. Sheep in this position are unable to right themselves. They are completely helpless with their spindly legs and wide bodies to be able to turn over and get up. This upside down position is extremely dangerous for sheep. First of all, a sheep that is cast down is vulnerable to predators. A wolf or coyote or bear could easily kill and eat a sheep that is upside down. Secondly, the sheep’s four compartment stomach is in danger of building up gases that cut off circulation from the legs and result in death in a day or so. A shepherd who has lost sight of one of his sheep will search carefully and diligently knowing that a missing sheep might be in trouble. A cast down sheep requires immediate action and the shepherd must restore the sheep’s blood flow and health to ensure the sheep will survive.¹

Phillip Keller from “A Shepherd’s Look at Psalm 23” writes,

“Again and again I would spend hours searching for a single sheep that was missing. Then more often than not I would see it at a distance, down on its back, lying helpless. At once I would start to run toward it - hurrying as fast as I could - for every

¹ Joel Beeke, “The Lord Shepherding His Sheep” page 112.

minute was critical. Within me there was a mingled sense of fear and joy: fear it might be too late; joy that it was found at all".²

The bible uses the analogy of sheep to describe God's chosen people, believers in Christ who are adopted into God's family. Isaiah 53:6 says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." We are like the helpless sheep who wander off and get turned upside down and are unable to right ourselves. Psalm 79:13 says, "But we your people, the sheep of your pasture..." and Psalm 119:176 says, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments." When sheep are mentioned in scripture we should pay attention because these references tell us about our condition as humans.

The picture of sheep in the bible is to show us our true state of being. We are dependent on God, our Shepherd for everything. Sheep cannot find food for themselves, nor can they defend themselves against predators. Left on their own, sheep will not survive. Matthew 9:36 says sheep are harassed and helpless without a shepherd. Without our Lord and Shepherd, we are doomed to eternal death. We can do nothing to make ourselves "right" with God.

Sheep are foolish. Sheep will leave a lush pasture of green grass to feed on brown dead grass for no reason. Sheep cannot find their way back to their own sheep pen. Sheep do not know or use wisdom to make decisions. Psalm 73:22 tells us that we too were foolish and ignorant and "a beast" before we were called by God. Without God and His wisdom, we are foolish and our lives are without purpose.

Sheep wander off and get lost. Sheep may wander because they are scared and flee, but they cannot find their way home. Sheep may wander because they are just following the other sheep, not aware of where they are going. Sheep may wander because they are curious and want to inspect something interesting more closely. All of these reasons take them away from their shepherd and lead them to danger. Without a shepherd, sheep cannot survive. Isaiah 53:6 says "we like sheep have gone astray" and Hosea 11:6 says that "My people are bent on backsliding from me". The picture of both sheep and God's people is that we are prone to wander. We are prone to chase after other gods and idols for happiness and satisfaction. Just like sheep, we put ourselves in danger when we wander from God.

² Phillip Keller, "A Shepherd's Look at Psalm 23", page 62

Sheep are also stubborn.³ In Psalm 23, David talks about the shepherd using a rod and staff to comfort the sheep. A stubborn sheep who continues to wander off or pursue its own way, needs a rod of correction to keep it safe. Shepherds must watch continually for sheep who insist on going away from the flock. This is for the stubborn sheeps protection and safety.

So in Psalm 42 and 43 where the sons of Korah talk about their own souls being “cast down”, they are making a reference to sheep. They are saying they feel like sheep turned over on their backs and unable to get up or provide any help or hope to itself. This Psalmist is stuck. Most likely they have been “listening” to their own thoughts as they have been pursued by ungodly people and feel helpless to defend themselves. Psalm 43 starts out with “Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me.” This Psalm is written by people who are overwhelmed in sadness and hurt from being falsely accused and tormented by people who are evil. Our souls become “cast down” when we start listening to ourselves rather than going to God as our Shepherd.

In what ways do we listen to ourselves and become cast down?⁴

Firstly, like sheep who are careless and stand in soft, uneven ground and then fall over, God’s sheep become careless in the disciplines of grace and instead rely on grace of the past to sustain them. When a believer gets lazy about spending time with God, trusting in God’s daily mercies and grace, and tries to sustain themselves through past grace, the believer falls too. John Piper, in his book “Future Grace”, argues that each day we must trust in God’s grace for that day. The promises of God, that He is with us, that His grace is enough, that we will spend eternity with Him, all are true because God daily supplies the grace to be faithful to His promises. It is not enough to look at the past and cling to past grace, we must actively trust that God continues to provide what is needed every moment of the day. It is only through repentance, humility, and God’s grace that we are “righted” from being cast down in self sufficiency.

Secondly, sheep tip over when their wool becomes too heavy and cumbersome to withstand. The wool may have clumps of dirt and the sheep simply can’t stay on its feet. God’s sheep are often weighed down by sin and distractions. Hebrews 12:1 tells us to lay aside every weight and sin which so easily entangles us”. Often the weight of pride is too great to withstand. When we convince ourselves that our way is best, that we should have been treated better than we were, that we deserve better than we have, we are upside down in God’s kingdom. God opposes the proud (James 4:6). We are

³ Joel Beeke, “The Lord Shepherding His Sheep”, pages 21-22

⁴ Joel Beeke, “The Lord Shepherding His Sheep, page 113-114. This blog is using his 3 ideas for why sheep become cast.

“cast down” when we think in opposition to God because we are deluding ourselves into thinking we are something that we are not. Our pride blinds us and leaves us helpless, hovering near death. There is nothing more dangerous to our souls than having God oppose us.

Sheep may also be cast down due to obesity. A sheep may overeat out of foolishness and become so heavy it cannot stay upright. God’s sheep may become cast down when the interests and distractions of the world become too great. When a believer is drawn into social media, news, materialism, or sexual immorality promoted by the culture, he may become cast down. The mind is fed by worldliness rather than the Word of God. We need God’s Word to transform our minds so that we are not conformed to the world. We get stuck in sinful patterns of thoughts and desires and become unable to rescue ourselves.

But God has provided the help and hope we need when we are cast down! Psalm 23 tells us that “He restores my soul”. The word restore means to “turn back” or “turn again”. When we are cast down, we are in need of God who “turns us back” to a right position with Him.

God is our faithful Shepherd who seeks diligently to find His fallen sheep and right them. John 10 tells us that God is our good Shepherd. He leads his own sheep by name (verse 3). God goes before His sheep and His sheep follow Him (verse 4). Jesus calls Himself the door where all true sheep can find pasture (verse 9). Jesus is the only way to be “right” with God. We must be made upright by the atonement of His blood for our sins as we receive salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. Verse 11 tells us Jesus is the good Shepherd who lays His life down for His sheep. As the faithful, perfect Shepherd, no one is able to snatch God’s sheep from His hand (verse 29).

In a “Shepherd’s Look at Psalm 23”, Phillip Keller continues to describe a shepherd’s response:

“As soon as I reached the cast ewe my very first impulse was to pick it up. Tenderly I would roll the sheep over on its side.... Then straddling the sheep with my legs I would hold her erect, rubbing her limbs to restore circulation to her legs. This often took quite a little time. When the sheep started to walk again she often just stumbled, staggered and collapsed in a heap once more. All the time I worked on the cast sheep I would talk to it gently.... Always couched in language that combined tenderness and rebuke, compassion and correction.

Little by little the sheep would regain its equilibrium. It would start to walk steadily and surely. By and by it would dash away to rejoin the others, set free from its fears and frustrations, given another chance to live a little longer.”⁵

As Keller was a careful, prudent shepherd, our Father and Shepherd is holy and perfect. God through Christ has made a way for His sheep to be rescued and redeemed from their cast down position. God offers His grace and mercy new every single day for us to trust and live by in whatever circumstances we face. God gives us His word and perfect guidance for every situation. 2 Peter 1:3-4 says “ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.” We are foolish sheep who chase after worldliness or allow pride to distract from partaking in the divine nature. We experience emotional sadness and despondency when we are choosing to be foolish, stubborn, wanderers from God’s word.

As the sons of Korah respond to their cast down souls, “Hope in God!” we need to do the same. Don’t foolishly keep wandering or being stubborn about how you are living. Speak truth to yourself. “Hope in God!”. Remind yourself of God’s promises and choose to trust that He is faithful to keep them. Rather than neglecting God’s word, fellowship with other believers, and prayer time alone with God, tell yourself “Hope in God” and then take steps to use the graces God has given you to grow in trusting Him more deeply.

⁵ Phillip Keller, “A Shepherd’s Look at Psalm 23”, page 63.