

## A Shepherd Restores His Sheep

Rev. A. T. Vergunst - Psalm 23:3a  
(5<sup>th</sup> sermon in a series of sermons on Psalm 23)

Sing: Psalter 221:1-3

Read: Hosea 14

Sing: Psalter 286:1,3,5,6

Sing: Psalter 342:1-4

Sing: Psalter 90:1-3

Children, I can almost always see and hear what is really important to you. I know what it is, because you talk to me about what you like or what you would like to have and the more excited you are, the more important it is. So, when we listen to Psalm 23, what was most important to David? What did he speak mostly about? Clearly, it is Jehovah, his Shepherd. He wrote this Psalm because he loved his Shepherd but also because he wanted others to know and love Him.

Those who by God's grace are the sheep of the Lord Jesus, how much do we speak about the Shepherd and what He has done or is doing in our life? Do we glory about Him rather than about all we do or have? Do we live as the LORD saith, "*But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me*" (Jeremiah 9:24a). Maybe you think, "Oh, but I have so little to say and I am still so unsure about it as well?" Let me encourage you from my own experience. Often the heart can be cold, distracted or even be struggling with doubt. But when in my pastoral or ministerial work I am called to speak well of the King and His ways, and above all, about His heart, the Spirit often comes along with it to make the little increase and to rekindle the flame of love in the heart! Then the experience of the men to Emmaus will be yours. Even when they were talking about Him in all their sadness, He came along and caused their hearts to burn as He opened up the Scriptures. Has Jesus not promised, "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*" (Matthew 18:20). So, be encouraged, as David was, to speak more about the Shepherd. It will bring Him nearer and will increase the joy of His communion.

Let's now consider the words of vs. 3 more closely, "*He restoreth my soul.*" This Scripture speaks about THE SHEPHERD RESTORING HIS SHEEP". May I lead you to consider observations,

- 1) He needs to do this because Christ's sheep often need restoration.
- 2) He is the only Shepherd that knows how to restore them.

First, the Shepherd restores His sheep because they often need restoration. It is important to realize that when David confessed "*He restoreth my soul,*" that this was the confession of a believer. David is not referring to the initial restoration that we all need. We all need to be made alive, to be born again from above! Without this initial restoration of our hearts, we are not Jehovah's sheep. No truth is more dreadful! If unconverted, then you are still in your sin. Then you are still *like a sheep gone astray* as Isaiah wrote. (Isaiah 53:6). Do you realize how dangerous this is? You are born astray from God, that means you are spiritually separated from the Shepherd. You are on your own in this dangerous wilderness of the world, facing the devil and all his servants. Besides, you have a heart that is treacherous, weak, and filled with every sinful tendency that can be found on this globe!

It is important therefore to place ourselves in David's shepherd shoes when we consider these words. To 'restore a sheep' doesn't refer to a sheep being depressed or discouraged and the shepherd making it feel better again. David is thinking about the sheep's one great but destructive skill: to wander off and to get lost. This is no doubt truer in David's context than today's. The sheep country in David's days had no fences. He had to keep rams, ewes and lambs together with constant attentive management. With lions and bears around, a shepherd was on call 24/7. He could never leave the sheep alone.

Once a sheep knows it is lost, it tries to hide under a bush or rock and begins to quiver and bleat. Now it is in deadly danger and they are totally helpless. A shepherd knows this. Therefore all day his eyes scan the flock to see if any is missing or is going astray by wandering from the flock. His ears are strained to hear the distress sounds of lost sheep for if he doesn't locate a lost sheep quickly it will be heard and killed by a predatory animal.

When a sheep goes lost, it could be caused by a careless shepherd. But that is never the case spiritually. The LORD is never the cause of the straying of any of

His sheep. James pointed this out clearly, *"Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man."* (James 1:13). God is not the Creator of the misery in our life. Although the days of darkness in His children may be multiple, this is never due to the lack of the Shepherd's care. Although the Shepherd will lead His sheep through the valleys of the shadow of death, many of God's sheep have experienced that in such valleys He often is felt the nearest. Let's be careful how we speak about the days of darkness in God's sheep! It reflects ill on the glory of the Shepherd. Let's never make it sound like that it is the Shepherd's delight to leave His sheep to plod on in darkness and doubt. Such is not the truth. It is because of our own sinful departures and neglect of the means of grace that we miss the nearness of the Shepherd. Let us all uphold the character of the Shepherd. Let us be careful how we speak so we never cast a shadow of doubt on Him as being the good and gracious Shepherd, Who leads and guides His sheep. Spiritual darkness is mostly always self-inflicted. Asaph in his fierce spiritual struggle with God's providence, was afraid to speak while in that condition. He wrote, *"If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children"* (Ps. 73:15). He was afraid that he would offend God's name when he sat in the deep pit of doubt and temptation as if God was at fault. Only afterwards, when restored, did he write Ps. 73 in which he vindicated God while he acknowledged himself at fault.

Let's examine three reasons why the sheep of Jesus often get into spiritual troubles so that we may avoid it.

a) The first one is that we let ourselves be guided by our feelings. I picture a ewe nibbling away at the grass in front of her. Looking up, she spots a nice clump of grass a few meters away. Without any thoughts, she moves forward and while nibbling on that juicy grass, she spots another desirable spot to graze. Again, with a few steps she reaches it and so she keeps going. It never seems to cross her mind to think, "Should I go out so far? Can I find my way back again? Where am I going?" She just keeps going, following the suggestions of her feelings to satisfy her appetite. In other words, she lets her feelings guide her. Or perhaps it is better to say, 'She lets the juicy clump of grass, desirous to her eye, *shepherd* her.' Finally, she realizes how far she has wandered away, she panics and begins to run in the opposite direction. Exhausted, fearful, confused, and needy, she finds a spot to hide and bleats.

Do you recognize this sheep in yourself? Don't we act and live in similar ways. Don't we often let our feelings guide us? Don't we often let desirable things, exciting successes, indulgent activities shepherd us? It would be wonderful to be able to write that this only happens to those who are unregenerate. But we know the sad truth even of David himself. He allowed a tempting sight of Bathsheba to shepherd him into adultery and followed the wicked suggestions of his own evil heart to murder. Like him, nibbling on things of the world, we can slowly wander away from the right path or the right Shepherd. Like the sheep, when away from the nearness of the Shepherd, the easier it is for predators to make us their prey. These predators are always on the prowl. In nature lions, cougars, coyotes and foxes all sit out in the surrounding hills where these sheep graze. Hiding and patiently watching behind the rocks while staying out of sight, they watch for one of those silly sheep who are following their stomach. And when they get a little bit too far away from the protection of the shepherd, they pounce and the sheep is done.

Friends, God didn't create our feelings *to guide us*. It is Satan's most common strategy to lead us astray. He conquered Adam and Eve by an appeal to their feelings, and he still snares God's own sheep by the appeal to their feelings. God created us, however, with a mind to lead our actions. Feelings are certainly a very important and beautiful part of our personal humanity but they were never meant to be the leader of our decisions and choices. Isn't that what we say to our young men or women as they begin a relationship with one that will not be a good spouse? Don't we plead with them to *think* deeply instead of letting their feelings guide them? In the same way God speaks to His sheep, "*See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise. Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.*" (Ephesians 5:16-17). God says, "Think about where you walk, watch what you read, be careful who you talk to, be alert with whom you are going around! *Walk circumspectly, not as fools!* Don't let your feelings guide you, even as fools allow it. *Walk as wise men* who let their mind be guided by the truths of God's Word. He adds to that, "*Redeem the time for the days are evil*". This means we are to keep both eyes open every moment for our adversary is watching us constantly to snare us. "*Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. And be not drunk with wine wherein is excess but be filled with the Spirit.*" (Ephesians 5:17-18). Not all the things that 'feel good' are good!

In the sheep world there is something called 'the Judas Goat.' This goat was trained to lead sheep who were to be butchered. Imagine the sheep are in a pen, and they are to walk up a little ramp towards the butcher. The smells and sounds make them uneasy so they refuse to walk up the ramp. To overcome their hesitancy, the butcher would train a Judas goat. The little goat would mix among the sheep and then when called, he would walk up the ramp. Once the sheep were following him, he would go further, and wait again. At the end of the ramp he went left back into the pen while the sheep had no other way but to go right to the butcher's knife. Satan also has his Judas Goats. They mostly look innocent. That is why Paul says, "walk circumspectly." Don't let your feelings guide you. Let your mind be on the Word or on the Shepherd instead and even if it goes against your feelings, follow God's Word.

b) The second reason that sheep need restoration is because they often get themselves trapped in comfortable looking place. Sheep like comfort. When they have filled their tummy, they look for a little hollow in which they can comfortably lay down and relax. As they lie down, sometimes they shift, and by moving they shift their balance point. Before they realize, they end up on their back. Such a sheep on its back is called a "cast sheep". Psalm 42:5 is a reference to such a condition, "*Why art thou cast down, O my soul?*". A cast sheep lies on his back and flays his legs around but he cannot roll back over. So trapped, he begins to swell up. If the sheep is not quickly freed from that condition, it will die. When David sings about, "*He restoreth my soul*" he may also be thinking as a shepherd about the cast down sheep. Among the sheep, there are three types that are prone to become cast down. Let's consider each and learn from them.

i) The first ones are the self-indulgent, lazy sheep. They look for comfort. We need to learn that in Christian life it is not about comfort in the first place. The ABC of Christian life is to take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow Him. Look at the Shepherd. Did He come here to have a comfortable life? Did He come here to have a luxuriant, self-indulgent life? No! He came to lay down His life for His sheep. That same Shepherd speaks to His people as He exhorts us to lay down our life for our brethren. Cast down sheep, as I said are the sheep that are self-indulgent. Consider what you are reading, what you are looking at, how much

time you spend on your hobbies and on your friendships and relationships? All the things that cater to the "old man" will lead to 'cast down' believers. God calls His sheep to the discipline of poverty and privation, as the Puritans would say. Why? Because we are in this world to serve the kingdom of God and the glory of His work! Consider Paul's brilliant example in what he wrote about his own Christian life, "*Every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things*" (1 Corinthians 9:25). He referred to an athlete. If an athlete indulges in all kinds of bad foods, he will suffer. Instead he chooses the high protein foods and the healthy foods. He will show great self-control in all things. Paul continues, "*Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection:*" (v26-27). We don't meet Paul as a cast down sheep because this man prayerfully and scripturally *fought* to keep down the self-indulgent old man. And he sought to starve him, as he kept on feeding and focusing on the things of God's kingdom. He exercised daily but not to tone his body but his conscience, "*And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.*" (Acts 24:16)

ii) The second type of sheep that are often cast down are the ones that become too fat. Overfed sheep become fat, unhealthy and unproductive. The shepherd needs to balance the food of the sheep, so that they don't become over fat. Spiritually, there are overfed Christians today. Overfed with outward prosperity and material success. Overfed with the overemphasis on the here and now. None of this promotes spiritual health. Remember Lot. The reason that he lost his wife in Sodom, was in large way Lot's own fault as well. He liked the green valleys of Sodom, but soon he moved from the valley to city. This righteous man vexed his own soul and lost his entire family. Consider Hezekiah. It is so sad to see this black blot at the end of this life. What beautiful grace he displayed as he stood before the people of Israel and encouraged them to rest on God. How urgent his prayer was when he was sick! But after all those conflicts are over, he is carried away with the riches. Cast down by being overfed with the things of the world. Take Solomon! What a beautiful beginning but how quickly even this wisest man was overfed, indulgent and cast down. Lastly, look at David! How did his sin of compromise start? Scripture records that he took it easy as everyone

else was at war. While indulging the flesh, he was carried away by his feelings and was painfully cast down in a trench of sin he couldn't restore himself from.

iii) The third type of sheep that often get cast down are those that have not been regularly shorn, and their wool becomes too heavy. If you have ever seen a sheep with too much wool living in the wilderness, you would hardly recognise it as a sheep. Such an unshorn sheep becomes completely caked in mud and manure, tangled with burrs and sticks, and plagued with ticks. The weight becomes so heavy that the sheep hardly knows how to move on. Consider the sheep's wool as the place where you and I rub the world. Think of it as our contact point with the world. God's sheep need to watch their contact with the world. Some contact with our world is unavoidable. Through your work or your travel, you rub with people you cannot avoid. By being in the world, the world will rub on to our life. But there is also unnecessary contact or involvement with the things of the world which can be and should be avoided. For all involvement with the world affects the spiritual condition of God's sheep. How easily we pick up ideas and mind-sets, the principles from the toxic environment in which we live because we are not on our guard. We read or listen and indulge ourselves in the things of 'time and sense' but we are minimally in the Scriptures. Our prayer is hurried and formal. We are content to be away from the Shepherd's nearness. We are not asking Him, "Lord, please help me to sort through these things. Help me to stay clear from all these pollutions. Help me to live separate in this world. Lead me and keep me on the straight and narrow."

In all of the above, I have described the common ways in which a sheep gets lost and they form the background of David's confession, "*He restoreth my soul.*"

What a precious Gospel this is! The Shepherd is the cause of the restoring. It is an action done for the sheep rather than done by the sheep. Unaided, no sheep can find his way back or deliver herself from a cast down position. As a lost sheep, the only hope is the shepherd. Such is the Shepherd David has and such is what we will sing in Psalter 342:1-4. The poet here sings as a sheep gone astray.

Psalter 342:1-4

How precious is that psalm that we just sang! It speaks about the same matter as in Psalm 23, "*the LORD, Jehovah, restoreth my soul.*" All restoration

comes from the Shepherd, again and again. Each morning, the shepherd would find a high place and standing there, he would count his sheep. If one is missing, he knows that there might be a cast sheep. Immediately he scans the sky. If he sees vultures, he runs because most likely the vultures have already discovered the lost and sheep. He knows that vultures aren't the only ones looking for cast sheep. There are predators also. Cast sheep are an easy prey. So the shepherd hastens to find his lost sheep. No, he is not running in anger. Instead, compassion and anxiety fill his heart for his poor sheep. He is not condemning those sheep for he knows that no matter how often he tells them, they always remain sheep. How much more true is this about the heavenly Shepherd. Jehovah knows who His people are. He knows their frame; He remembers that they are all dust. (Psalm 103:14). He knows that none can restore themselves from having been wandered away, cast down or lost. Therefore, the heart of the Shepherd is filled with tenderness, love, compassion, understanding and desire as He eyes His flock day and night. Let this encourage us, children of God. He knows you are prone to backslide. He knows you are forgetful. He knows you are often led astray by your own flesh.

Even though you grieve Him like Peter did in Jesus' last night, the good Shepherd's heart still was full of compassion on the resurrection morning. Hear Him as He sought out His cast sheep Peter, "*Go tell my brethren, and Peter*" (Mark 16:7). Do you see the glory of the Shepherd? He doesn't say to the woman, "Now, don't tell Peter yet for a couple of days! Let him feel for a while where he brought himself!" No! Go tell Peter also, that I am risen again. This is the Shepherd's heart. He cares for His sheep.

*"He restoreth my soul."* My soul! My inner life! My spiritual walk! Literally this verse can be translated as "He brings me back or causes me to repent." The only hope for a lost sheep is the good shepherd who will come after me to find me, picking me up to carry me back to safety. How does the Shepherd do this?

There are various ways in which the Shepherd restores His sheep. First He seeks them out. A cast sheep can't even bleat for the Shepherd it just lays there, kicking its legs until it has no more strength. It bloats up and dies. So when the shepherd goes out in the field, he can call all he wants, but the sheep can't answer him. So it is often in the life of grace. They have become so disconsolate, so desolate, and maybe so far astray that there is hardly a cry left. Yet the



Shepherd knows and He hears it. So He looks for that sheep that is cast down. No true shepherd will shrug his shoulder and say "Oh well, he got himself in that mess! He will have to get himself out of it." The true Shepherd seeks until He has restored His sheep.

How does He restore such a cast down or lost sheep? One word describes the shepherd's actions: gentleness. A cast down sheep as well as a lost sheep, deeply frightened, must be dealt with in tenderness. Shall we follow the shepherd as he finds a cast down sheep? First, he gently rolls that sheep on its side and presses on its tummy to let all the built-up gases escape. After the gas is relieved, he puts the sheep up on its' four legs, straddling it between his knees and while holding it up, he gently rubs the legs to get the blood circulation going. He knows that all this needs to be done very gently! Those cast sheep cannot be yelled at. They cannot be roughly treated. They need to be restored gently! After some rubbing, if he finally finds that the sheep can't stand, he will carry it on his shoulders or in his arms back to the fold.

What a beautiful picture this is of the Shepherd's care in restoring straying or cast down souls. David himself is an example of how Jehovah restored his soul. After having gone deeply astray in adultery and murder, how very wisely and gently did the LORD restore him. He sent Nathan the prophet. Very gently, Nathan approached David with a gripping story about a man killing his neighbor's only sheep while he owned a large flock himself. Without suspicion, David immediately responded, "Oh that man needs to be killed!" After a moment of silence, Nathan responded, "You are that man." Don't think that Nathan thundered that in the room with a loud voice, "YOU ARE THAT MAN!" No, he didn't need to do that! The Spirit had prepared the heart of David already. In the all the months since he had gone astray, David's conscience has been speaking day and night. Yet he continued to ignore his sin until God confronted him with those cutting words, "Thou art that man!" David broke down. So God restores souls today. He leads them in the way of repentance. No restoration can happen without breaking the blinding and binding power of sin on your soul. He restores when He humbles your heart to finally acknowledge your transgressions. He restores the soul when He brings you on your knees, to the Shepherd. Christ does this through the Spirit with the Word. *"He restoreth my soul."*

In this restoring, God is often pleased to use fellow believers. As the Shepherd is gentle, so the Shepherd also requires His people to be gentle. Hear how the Lord speaks about this, "*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ.*" (Galatians 6:1,2). The 'gentleness' is when we come in the spirit of meekness. When we come with judgement and criticism, all we do is further damage or even jeopardize the sheep. In another place, Jesus the Shepherd instructs us that before we deal with the sins of any fallen sheep, we must first do eye surgery and remove the beam out of our own eye, before we touch the mote in our fallen brother's eye. Eye-surgery is very gentle work and how can we do that when our own eye is punctured with a beam!

Sometimes when the Shepherd sees a lost sheep entangled in the bushes, He might decide to leave it for a while. One shepherd told how one of his ewes got lost. She had fallen over the ledge and as the shepherd came to the ledge he looked down and saw her on the ledge below. He decided to go home. After a couple of hours, he came back again, but decided again to leave her. Finally after hours, he came back, and then saw it was the right time to go down to fetch sheep. Why did he do this? Well when he came first, he saw that the sheep was still on all fours. She was still too strong. If he had gone down to that sheep at that first moment the sheep would resist him in her fear and both might tumble down the steep incline. So he had to wait.

Likewise, in the soul care of the Shepherd Jehovah. At times He allows His people to struggle on for a while. He knows that the strength and resistance need to be broken so that His child will be open to His teaching. This is illustrated in David's life. Why didn't God send Nathan nine months earlier? Why did He allow His child to wander in these ways of sin? He did because in those nine months of spiritual agony David needed to be brought to his senses. He wrote about it in Psalm 32 v 4, "*My moisture is turned into the drought of summer.*" He felt so dry in his soul. God's hand was heavy on him day and night. He could never get away from the sense of God's wrath and yet David wasn't bowing his knees in a humble confession. The Shepherd needed to break his pride, his stubbornness, his sinful reasoning so that he would be open to receive God's message! Yet as in the story of the ewe on the ledge, so the Chief Shepherd doesn't lose sight the lost sheep.

Jesus sees some of His sheep struggling in the entanglements of sin and guilt, darkness and fear, Yet He never takes His eyes off them for a moment.

One reason that sheep get cast is that they have too much wool. Each sheep needs a regular shearing. No sheep enjoys being shorn. But they have no choice. As the shepherd grabs the sheep, he lifts her right of her feet, puts her on her back end, and now the sheep is helpless. But the one who suffers the most of this shearing job is not the sheep but the shepherd. Especially if the sheep hasn't been shorn for a few years. The wool now is hard and stiff and the shepherd struggles to get his shears through it. This truth contains a sweet and stirring thought! To restore the soul is the harder on the Shepherd. It is hard when He needs to shear His sheep with afflictions; when He sometimes needs to lead them into some deep trials to wean them of this world or return them to the straight and narrow way. Jeremiah captured this truth aptly, *"But though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men."* (Lamentations 3:32-33).

Those of you who are parents know this personally. When you need to discipline your child, it often hurts more our parent heart than the child's. So it is when the Lord needs to scourge His own children, let's never forget that He never does this with joy but is forced to out of necessity to restore our soul through the pathway of pain.

In conclusion, have you been examining your own walk and heart this morning? Are you still unconverted? Are you still living without this good Shepherd? Maybe you say, "How do I know that I am still astray?" This is a good question.

Let's seek to answer it by asking you four questions. Examine your heart by these four questions before the Lord Himself.

My first question is, "What is the more appealing choice: to spend a day in a place where God is spoken about and where He stands in the centre or to spend a day in the pleasures of the world whatever that may be?" Honestly answer that question. What is more appealing? That gives you one answer on whether you are astray.

My second set of questions is, "What is more distressing, having sinned or being caught sinning? Having done something in your heart that you know was

wrong, or that somebody might have found out that you did wrong? What is more distressing? What would weigh heavier?" This is how you can examine whether you are spiritually astray. For it only 'being caught' weighs heavy, then the sin itself isn't the burden. To the spiritual sheep, sin becomes the main things, Hear how David expressed that, "*Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight*" (Psalm 51:4).

Thirdly, think about God. "What is more fearful to you: facing God's majesty and power, or facing His astonishing goodness?" You might say, "That is a strange question!" No, it isn't if you think it through. Every sinner is afraid of God's power. Fear fills our heart ever since our Fall. But when God opens your eyes for your sins, you begin to see what you have done against an infinitely good God! Now you realize that trampling His exceeding goodness is far worse than defying His majesty. Do you sense what I am trying to say? Defying God's majesty is wicked, but defying God's love and goodness is doubly wicked. And if that doesn't distress you as much as facing His majesty, then it reveals you are still astray.

My last question. "What brings more tears and frustration in your day: failing to live up to God's glorious being, or failing to get your own desires and to see your own plans succeed?" What burdens you the most between these two?" If your heart is more burdened with the truth that you can't find it in you to live to God's glory, to love God above all and to love your neighbours as yourself, you have evidence that God has made your heart alive to Him. But if your main frustration in life is when your agenda isn't fulfilled, when your plans aren't accepted or when your day hasn't accomplished all your earthly goals, then you show evidences of still being astray.

Friends, these four questions reveal why you need this initial restoration of the grace of God in your life. You are astray! Being astray in God's sight is being guilty! We have gone astray as mankind in our conscious and wilful choice of rebellion against what we knew of God's will. This rebellion has justly angered God for what iniquity was there in Him that we should rebel against Him? Did He fail us? Was He not a worthy God? Oh, He is so worthy for though justly angry with us for the choices we made, God's Shepherd heart is filled with compassionate faithfulness to His prodigal creatures. When He presses home this sharp truth, He is speaking this truth in love. When He commands us to repent

from our wicked ways and return to Him, it is His Shepherd's heart that is moved with compassion. Hear Him speak, *"Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?"* And again, hear His Words from Psalm 95:8, *"Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your heart."* This text is often misquoted. Many people say, *"If you hear His voice, harden not your heart."* This verse doesn't say *"if you hear."* It says, *"if you WILL hear His voice, harden not your heart."* God here addresses our stubborn will which is not willing to return to him. What fools we are! None is greater than Jehovah Who made every provision to be reconciled with us. But He will not always remain a Shepherd Who seeks sinners. There comes a time that He will separate the sheep from the goats, without any more mercy. Hasten friends, hasten today. *"If you will hear His voice harden not your heart."*

Lastly, are you sensing that you have strayed away from the paths of righteousness? Are you aware that your 'wool' is quite soiled with all the worldly things? Or are you one of those cast down sheep, gone astray and now helpless? Are you asking, "Where must I go? What must I do?"

Heed the Shepherd's voice from Hosea 14:1-2b, *"Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord and say unto Him, Take away all iniquity."* Begin to acknowledge your iniquities. Trace back and seek light to see where you went astray. Understand that you cannot reverse or cancel those sins. Nothing in you or me can save ourselves as God expressed in vs. 3, *"Asshur shall not save us, we will not ride upon horses; neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods; for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy."* Will you turn to the LORD this morning? Will you, as the sheep in His pasture, take heed to do as He says, *"Today, if you will hear his voice, harden not your heart."* (Hebrews 3:15).

Hardening your heart is when you don't return to the Shepherd with the matter of the words in Hosea. No, don't tell Him that you will fix it; that you will make new resolutions; that you will start better today! Remember, *"Asshur shall not save us."* You can't save yourself! Bow before this Shepherd and plead His own Words which He as it were gives us in this Scripture in Hosea, "Oh God, receive me graciously. Take me in Thy hand. Guide me by Thy Spirit. Hold me by Thy Word. Restore my soul!"

What a beautiful encouraging revelation closes this chapter of Hosea, *"I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely; for mine anger is turned away from him. (v5a) I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily. (v8b) From Me is thy fruit found."*

Amen.

Psalter 90:1-3