

GOD'S SHEPHERD - A CHRISTMAS STORY

BY R.F. WILSON

The frost of forty winters had etched deep lines into the shepherd's face. Having spent his entire life outdoors on Bethlehem's hills, he was old at forty — and cold. The hillside where he sat this day was cold, too, and he pulled his mantle close about him to block the wind.

Every so often he would shift position, not out of discomfort so much, but from a sense of unease, anxiety, crowdedness. Instead of hundreds



of sheep with whom he felt quite at home, this hillside was flocked with people — thousands of them — listening attentively to the Teacher. They could hear him fairly well, except when the wind whisked away his words.

Tobias ben David was the shepherd's name, though people called him Toby. His flocks were in good hands this week, cared for by his grown sons, but Toby had left them to listen to Jesus of Nazareth. Today the

Teacher was talking about salvation, how God came to save his people from their waywardness and sins, to rescue them and gather them close.

Now Jesus' illustration turned to sheep. Toby felt better. He knew a lot more about sheep than people.

"The good shepherd," Jesus was saying, "lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand who doesn't own the flock runs away when he sees the wolf coming, but not the good shepherd...." One night, years ago, the men Toby had hired to watch the flock with him fled when

they saw a mountain lion roaming the hills. But Toby had stayed. Shepherding was his livelihood. He knew the sacrifices that good shepherding required. He knew about defending defenseless lambs. He knew about putting his life on the line for the sheep. That's what good shepherds did.

Jesus continued, "Suppose you have 100 sheep and when night comes one is missing. What do you do? You leave the 99 sheep all safe together and then climb the hills, looking, searching until you find the lost sheep. Then you pick him up, put him on your shoulders, bring him down the hill to the camp, and ask your fellow shepherds to rejoice with you."

"Your heavenly Father is like that," Jesus said. "When you have lost your way, he will rescue you and save you and never give up on you until he finds you — and you find him."

Toby's heart was racing. He felt a lump in his throat. He understood. Toby had combed the hills for lost sheep, not stopping, not quitting. He knew the joy of discovery, of rescuing the sheep from a thicket, of bringing it back and celebrating with his friends. He had been that kind of shepherd.

But he also knew how it felt to wander off, feeling lost, aimless, trapped. Clueless about where he was and where he was going. Flailing about, struggling to climb out of what seemed like a steep ravine. That's why he came today to hear the Teacher, hoping to regain the faith he had felt as a child, a ten-year-old child.

His mind spun back to the evening of his tenth birthday. Like nearly every night, he was out on the hills with his dad or his uncles, caring for the sheep. The stars were brilliant, dancing in the black sky. But suddenly an overpowering bright light flooded the hillside. A voice

boomed out, "Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people. For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!"

A savior, a rescuer — shepherds' work. He had often wondered about the boy-child they discovered that night, lying in a manger, just as the angel had said. Toby had knelt down and worshipped the baby who bore the world's destiny upon his tiny shoulders. What had become of him, this baby? By now he must be thirty-something. Had this savior saved anyone yet? Rescued anyone? Could he rescue me from my aimless existence? Toby wondered.

Just then the wind caught Jesus' words and blew them Toby's direction. "I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus was saying, "who lays down his life for the sheep. Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," he said with warmth and joy full on his face, "for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

I wonder? thought Toby as he felt big tears begin to roll down his cheeks and into his beard. I wonder? thought Toby as joy and the certainty of God's love began to fill his heart until it seemed like he would explode. I wonder? thought Toby, if this Jesus is the little baby I saw that night, the Savior of the world? Yes, thought Toby, he must be. His words found me and, frankly, he sounds just like he's ... God's shepherd.