

The Shepherd as Model for the Statesman

One of the great leaders in history is King David. We are naturally drawn to seek to understand how he became such an effective leader. I believe the key is where God told us:

He chose David His servant and took him from the sheepfolds; He brought him from tending ewes to be shepherd over His people He shepherded them with a pure heart and guided them with his skillful hands (Psalm 78:70-72).

From this, we are told that God used a unique school to prepare David to be king, one that might surprise us. We tend to think that the best training to prepare for high leadership is to learn while fulfilling lower governing positions. However, God is explaining here that He prepared David to govern a whole nation by grooming him as a shepherd of sheep.

Let us consider what God did in preparing David to be king. One aspect of David's training is that he accepted humility. There is hardly a responsibility that is more humbling than caring for sheep. The sheep need the constant watch of the shepherd night and day. They have no natural defenses against predators. They are often helpless in finding food and water, even in discerning between healthy food and poisonous plants. The sheep continually need the watchful eye of the shepherd for their survival.

If one thinks about it, between the shepherd and the sheep, who is really the master? It is the needy ones. Even among the sheep, some are needier than others. It is these sheep to whom the shepherd is literally a servant.

Jesus described the necessary attitude toward the neediest sheep when He told this parable as an analogy with our straying from God and being brought back to Him:

What man among you, who has 100 sheep and loses one of them, does not leave the 99 in the open field and go after the lost one until he finds it? When he has found it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders, and coming home, he calls his friends and neighbors together, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!" (Luke 15:4-6)

In this parable, we have the reminder that the shepherd must give the most attention to the sheep with the greatest needs.

Furthermore, in the instruction we are looking at, God tells us that David took the same attitude in caring for the people he was charged with:

He shepherded them with a pure heart and guided them with his skillful hands (Psalm 78:72).

God is making clear that He caused David to have the same concern for, and to give the same care to, the people within his nation that he earlier had provided to the sheep under his care. That this was indeed David's attitude while governing is seen in his prayer for his son Solomon years later, who followed him as king:

May he vindicate the afflicted among the people, help the poor, and crush the oppressor....For he will rescue the poor who cry out and the afflicted who have no helper. He will have pity on the poor and helpless and save the lives of the poor. He

will redeem them from oppression and violence, for their lives are precious in his sight (Psalm 72:4,12-14).

This heart attitude we may conclude reflects the attitude that was learned as a shepherd dependent upon God.

When we reflect further, we recognize that the sheep can never re-pay the shepherd for the sacrificial help that the shepherd has made on their behalf. Therefore, the shepherd cannot make it a priority to care for those most able to reward him, but rather is called to care for those least able to reward him. Similarly, the Statesman must look to the reward that Jesus described we must aspire to hear from the Ultimate King of the universe at the close of our lives:

Well done, good and faithful servant! (Matthew 25:23)

Another essential part of David's preparation is that he learned to depend upon God. David, during his later teen years, described that as he faced the predators of the sheep, he learned to depend upon God:

Whenever a lion or a bear came and carried off a lamb from the flock, I went after it, struck it down, and rescued the lamb from its mouth. If it reared up against me, I would grab it by its fur, strike it down, and kill it. ... Your servant has killed lions and bears... The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear ... (1 Samuel 17:34-37).

This shows that David was so serious about caring for the sheep placed within his care that he was willing to put his life at risk to the extent that he was forced to depend upon God.

We must conclude that the lessons David learned as a shepherd then include: humility; the need to care for the most vulnerable; focusing on the least able to pay back or reward the shepherd; and learn dependence upon God for challenges beyond our ability.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE STATESMAN:

Even if I may not have been fortunate to learn the lessons King David did as a shepherd boy, can I recognize that God has taught me to learn humility through experiences in my life to prepare me to serve the people?

Will anyone be able to say about me, as God said about King David: "He shepherded them with a pure heart and guided them with his skillful hands"?

Am I willing to humble myself before God as King David learned to do and to allow God to be the King over my life as He desires? And am I willing to continually learn from Him about shepherding my people?