

## The Lost Shepherd

by  
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The night air carried a chill and slipped it down the back of Eli's tunic. A shiver ran down his spine. Instinctively he pulled his cloak a little tighter around his neck. The blue-black sky was salted with the light of many thousands of stars. A thumb-nail moon hung on the far horizon like a tipped bowl ready to spill its contents.

It was another nightshift in the fields outside Bethlehem. A hundred sheep were bedded down in the grasses sprawling out below him. The night stretched on in a way that those who do their business during the day can never quite imagine.

Other flocks rested not far away and Eli knew their shepherds too were nestled in somewhere along the hillside, watching over their flocks by night. Momentarily Eli caught the sound of padding feet approaching from behind him and to the right. He turned to see Amos making his way toward him. Upon arrival the two greeted and Amos took a spot next to Eli. Quietness enveloped them for a few moments; theirs was the comfortable familiarity of a relationship forged over long years together on these solitary hills.

Finally Amos spoke: "Moshe and I made the third watch rounds. Bad news."

"What now?," asked a weary Eli.

"The count came out at only ninety-nine."

"Whose flock?" Eli asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yours."

"OK," Eli sighed. And with that he rose and disappeared down the hill.

Amos softly called after him, "I'll keep an eye on your flocks till you get back."

Eli never turned, but raised his hand to acknowledge Amos's promise, as if to say, "Thanks, my friend!"

The search took longer than Eli expected. The valley gave up no lost sheep, so he'd had to cross over the ridge and search behind the next spine of hills. Finally he'd found the lost one, mindlessly wandering alone on a dark and deserted stretch of open pasture.

He lovingly scolded the wanderer as he approached. At the sound of his voice the ewe's head snapped in his direction. In the dim light he thought he could make out an expression of familiarity and relief in the sheep's eyes. Dropping to his knees he ducked his head under her belly, pinned her front legs together in his right hand and her back legs in his

left. With a little more effort than he expected to use he stood upright, the still-chewing lamb resting across his shoulders.

Eli's lungs burned with heavy breathing and his lower back squawked with a dull ache as he rejoined his flock. He dropped once again to his knees and gently placed the found one on the dewy grass among the others of his flock. As he rose he ran his hand firmly, but lovingly across the back of her neck as if to say, "Welcome home. Now stay put!"

He turned and made his way back up the hill from which he might once more watch over the flock committed to his charge. But he didn't find Amos where he had left him. *Hmmm, must have split the difference between his flock and mine.* So he wandered to the left for a while, just to let Amos know he was back. But he found no Amos. *That's odd,* he thought to himself. *I've never known Amos to leave the flock unattended ... for any reason.*

Eli decided to sit right there, equidistant from his flock and Amos's. He could see them all from here anyway. They'd figure this out when the sun came up.

As the eastern ridge was just beginning to grow rosy, Eli saw something that made him rub his eyes and look again. Actually, he's not sure if he first saw them or *heard* them. They were all there—Amos, Shlomo, Moshe, and Uri—the whole night crew that had frequented these hills for years. But they were *together*—not each one with his flock. And they were running, jumping, hooting, hollering, shouting, singing ... he couldn't quite tell which best described their approach.

Sheep began to rustle prematurely. Eli welcomed the merry band with a wrinkled forehead and a mouth hanging open in disbelief. He was speechless. They were not. In fact they all talked at once—falling over one another in their excitement to tell Eli a story too fantastic to quite believe.

*Angels! Light! Glory! Bethlehem! King! Baby! Manger!*

The words tumbled out in an incoherent jumble.

Before long the sun had broken over the far line of hills and the day crew arrived. They too were subjected to the tales of wonder. They too scratched their heads in confusion.

As they made their way toward their homes, the four walked together. Eli trailed behind—watching, wondering. He didn't understand. But it was clear that whatever the others experienced in his absence, it bound them together in a new brotherhood. It created a fellowship which he didn't understand and which connected them in the bonds of common experience in a way which not even all their years together in the fields could compare. Just like that—while doing his duty, while being faithful, while seeking a lost one—Eli had become an outsider. Not that the others didn't try to include him, but he had simply missed out on this heavenly encounter, on this introduction to the child/King of which they spoke.

Months unfolded into a year, and years piled one upon another, stretching into decades. Lambs lived and died—many of them as sacrifices of worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. But the flock remained constant; always there was a flock to attend. The same five worked the same hills together into their older years. But nothing in those years of common existence and labor admitted Eli into the fellowship created that miraculous night so long ago. It isn't that Amos, Shlomo, Moshe, and Uri purposefully excluded Eli. In fact they spoke often to him of that night. But he hadn't been there. It was *their* experience, not his.

As festival time drew near once again, Eli, with his friends, selected the choicest of their herds. They made the plodding journey toward Jerusalem, their lambs destined to end their days as expressions of someone's plea for forgiveness, offered up on the altar to God.

Soon enough after arrival they had set up shop and pilgrims soon after their own arrival in Jerusalem began haggling with them. The streets were busy, noisy, a cacophony of voices, animal bleating, and cart wheels. It wasn't a sight so much to be seen, as felt and heard. It was all a bit dizzying for Eli who was more accustomed to the quiet, lonely nights on the hills near Bethlehem. Dutifully he sat, swallowed up by the bustle and confusion, keeping a careful eye upon his lambs. Watching was, after all, what shepherds do best. And people-watching does have its own kind of entertainment value. *Where do all these people come from?* Eli wondered to himself. It felt like all of Abraham's children had descended upon this one little corner of Jerusalem.

Then his eyes landed upon a solitary figure, standing across the way, back against the wall. He too was watching. But there was something different about him, something in his eyes. Something in the way he watched the people, almost as if he was watching *over* the people. Was it *concern*? Or maybe *pity*? *Love*, perhaps? Eli couldn't quite tell. Certainly there was a tinge of *sadness* in the stranger's countenance. Eli made himself look away, not wanting to gawk like some bumpkin who'd never been to the big city before. But almost involuntarily his eyes were drawn back—again and again. And every time he saw him, he saw him seeing people. There was something strangely familiar about it—almost shepherd like, as if he was watching over the people like a shepherd his sheep. Though he looked upon them all, it somehow seemed he saw them each one—harassed and helpless, as if they were lost sheep without a shepherd.

Then once, as his eyes drifted back toward the stranger, Eli nearly jumped out of his skin—for the stranger was looking back at him. And not just *at* him, but *into* his eyes, almost, it seemed, into his heart!

Eli forced his eyes away as quickly as possible, toward some innocuous spot on a wall. He tried to look nonchalant, but those eyes had seized him. It felt as if he was still in their grip, though he wasn't looking at him.

Suddenly Eli's trance was broken by the loud voice next to him. "How much for this one?" an insistent man with a perturbed look upon his face asked. *How many times has he asked that and I didn't hear him?* Eli wondered, a bit embarrassed.

Eli closed the sale and was lost for several more hours by the pressing crowds and their inquiries about his lambs. But that night, when he laid his head down to sleep, his mind filled with the image of that stranger's face and that look in his eyes.

A couple of days later after all five men's sheep had been sold, Eli and Amos walked the streets of the city before beginning their journey home to flocks and families. The country boys walked, mostly without talking, simply absorbing the sites, sounds, and smells of the pressing festival crowds. Then he saw him. Across the way. At the corner of two streets. The man from the market. But he wasn't alone now. And he wasn't watching, he was speaking. And a crowd was gathering. Eli grabbed a handful of Amos's tunic sleeve and pulled him without a word through the crowds to the edge of the listeners.

If this man's countenance had been captivating, his words were magical. Those gathered silently immersed themselves in this man's teaching. Just as they drew up within sound of his voice, Eli and Amos heard him say, "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."

Eli was stunned, lost in his thoughts. It wasn't exactly a trade secret, but there was something about the *way* he said the words and the stirring they created in Eli's heart. It was as if he had locked eyes with Eli and said, "I understand" ... and in a way that left no doubt in Eli's heart that indeed he did.

The current of the pushing crowds carried Eli and Amos partially down the street, against their wishes. In the confusion he asked Amos, "Who is that man?" Amos shrugged his shoulders and said, "Some rabbi they call Jesus."

Eli descended again into his thoughts. What was it about this man that so captivated him?

Just then Shlomo, Moshe, and Uri called out from across the way. Soon they were rejoined and headed down the path toward home.

Nights again folded into weeks, weeks into months. Another festival season rolled around and the five shepherds found themselves again in Jerusalem with this year's best of the flock. Once again the sheep were sold, one haggling transaction at a time. Once again the five shepherds walked the streets of the capital city before heading home.

Eli conjectured, almost hoped: *Any chance the same rabbi might show up again at the festival?* In the dark of many long nights Eli had wondered often after the rabbi, the magnetic nature of his countenance and the riveting words he had spoken. Eli even inquired, quietly so that the others didn't know, if anyone had heard if the rabbi Jesus was

in town? When a passerby said they thought he might be in the Temple courts, Eli gently steered the little huddle of shepherds in that direction.

*There he is!* Eli realized. He pushed through the crowds, temporarily separating himself from the other four. It was hard to hold your place in the push and shove of the masses, but he made out one sentence, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost!”

*What? What lost? Whose lost? Lost from what?* But the tides of humanity has pushed him out of earshot and he didn’t hear where the rest of the sermon went.

Eli knew that before they left for home he had to hear more from the teacher. The others finally caught up with him, shouting, “Hey, where’d you go? Thought we’d lost you for a second there!”

After supper, the crowds began to thin and the streets weren’t so full. The Temple was still filled, but it was a quieter place now. To the other four Eli nodded with his head in the direction of the crowd that had gathered in the far corner. They quietly took their place on the fringe of people and listened in on the sermon. Jesus was saying ...

“Truly, truly, I say to you ... he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep ... The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. ... I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ... I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. ... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”  
(John 10:1a, 2, 4-5, 11, 14-16, 27)

Lost in his thoughts, Eli felt a tug on the back of his collar. It was Shlomo, with an expression his face that said, “Come on! Let’s go.”

As their feet stirred the dust on the road to home, Eli emerged from his thoughts and asked the others, “What do you think he means?”

The four turned their heads, surprised to hear something from the dreamer they’d left to his thoughts. “What did *who* mean?”

“Jesus,” Eli replied.

“Mean about what?”

“Well, like when he said, ‘I am the good shepherd.’”

Silence answered his inquiry.

But he continued, “Or when he said, “My sheep heard my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

“Uh, well, we’re not exactly theological types, are we?” Moshe offered.

But Eli wouldn’t be dissuaded, “He said, ‘he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.’ I don’t get it! But I can’t stop thinking about it either.”

Eight eyes rolled; four mouths shut. The quintet walked on in thoughtful silence.

A couple of weeks later, the five of them setting around a common fire to ward off the night-chill, Amos, for the umpteenth time raised the topic of that glorious night that transpired on these hills decades before. “Guys, remember the color of that angel?” he queried. “It wasn’t the one angel that rocked me,” said Shlomo, “it was the multitude of the heavenly host that ‘bout scared me out of my sandals!” “It was the sight of the baby in the manger that sealed it for me,” Moshe added. And with that the saga unfolded as it had so often over the years.

The band of four reveled in the mystery of their common encounter. Though still at the fire, Eli felt utterly alone.

“What ever came of him?” Eli raised his voice.

Silence fell over the four. Eli never spoke during their recollections. Not that they’d ever said anything about it or even consciously thought about it really. It’s just that, well, it wasn’t done. He hadn’t been there. It wasn’t *his* experience.

“Um, what?” Amos said.

“What do you suppose ever came of him?” Eli repeated.

“Of whom?” Moshe asked.

“Of the baby.”

“Well,” said Uri with raised eyebrows, “I, I don’t know.” With that glances were passed around the fire and silence added the punctuation.

Eli broke the awkward silence, “Do you think we could find out?”

“Well,” offered Uri again, “I did hear that his family had fled to Egypt. But after that, who knows.”

Persistent, Eli asked, “What was his name?”

“The baby’s?”

“Yes, the baby’s. What was his name?”

“I don’t know. You know they probably didn’t name him till eight days later when they offered their sacrifices at the Temple,” said Moshe.

“But remember what the angel did say,” offered Amos.

“What?”

“That when we found the baby we would have found the Christ, the very Lord Himself.”

“Yes, well,” Uri inserted like a big period intended to end the discussion. They’d speculated about all this before, but it had gotten them nowhere.

Eli wouldn’t let it rest, however. “Do you think the inn keeper would know?”

“He’s been dead for ten years! And when they left town they didn’t want to be found.”

“But we could ask his family if they know anything.”

“Why are you so suddenly interested in all this?” Amos inquired. “You’ve never offered so much as a peep over all these years whenever we start reminiscing about that night.”

“That’s because it is *your* story, not mine,” Eli said, with deep emotion fueling his pronunciation of the word “your.” It felt good to say it, almost as if a long festering boil had been lanced.

“That night divided us,” he said. “Ever since it has been you four ... and then me.”

“What are you talking about?” Shlomo protested. “Of course you’re one of us! How many nights have we sat here together watching over our flocks?”

“True, but in the most defining night of your lives, I was on the other side of those hills,” Eli said as he raised his right hand and pointed toward the shadowy blue hills reflecting darkly the moon’s light. “I was lost in the dark, out seeking a stray when God visited you.”

Wordlessly they retreated into the familiar comfort of silence. No reply could change the realities that night had foisted upon their little band. The divide of the divine had been real, albeit unspoken and unintended.

As if they’d all silently contracted to avoid serious conversation the following days were filled mostly with chitchat, small talk, and mindless banter. Then one evening as the

embers in the fire burned low and faces were hard to distinguish in its ebbing glow, Uri broke the contract.

“Hey guys,” he said in a tone that betrayed the fact that he was about to venture onto uncomfortable territory. “Well,” Uri continued hesitantly, “I dropped by the inn the other day.” Somehow he knew every head had turned his way and, though they couldn’t see his face, nor he theirs, they were all looking directly at his shadowy silhouette. Their collective silence begged Uri to keep carrying the weight of this conversation. “So, thing is, the family didn’t really know much, but they did say they thought the father’s name was Joseph. And they had a fragment of a memory that he may have been a carpenter.”

*There!* Uri thought. *I’ve broken the moratorium on the topic and now it was someone else’s turn to run with this.*

Moshe admitted that it rang a bell, now that Uri mentioned it.

Amos somewhat reluctantly carried the second part of the conversation. “I’ve been asking around too,” he confessed. “Someone in town thought the family had later returned from Egypt, settling in Nazareth.”

“Nazareth!,” Shlomo exclaimed. But the fact was he’d been doing a little investigation of his own. This whole “Christ, the Lord” memory had left him unsettled. After a pause, he admitted, “I went to a local teacher and asked a few questions.”

“Like what?” Eli asked.

“I wanted to know if the prophets in any way connect the hope of Messiah with Bethlehem.”

“O come on!” Eli objected as if almost incensed by the idea.

“At least let him finish!” insisted Uri.

Shlomo continued: “The teacher said he’d have to get back to me. And, a few days later, he did. He said the prophet Micah wrote this, ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler,’” and here he paused for effect, “are you guys ready for this?”

“For what!?”

“... from you shall come a ruler who will *shepherd* my people Israel.”

*The Messiah a shepherd?*

Eli rolled the unlikely thought through his mind. By their collective silence the others admitted their skepticism as well. *As shepherds we’re necessary, but unwelcome*



*members of society. By most accounting: uncouth, unaccepted, and largely unwanted. The Messiah a shepherd?*

They'd always wondered why they were chosen to share such a remarkable welcome to the new child. This added a new dimension to their speculation. *Who more appropriate to welcome the Messiah than shepherds!*

"That's not all," Uri interjected. The others jerked back to collective thought, surprised to hear Uri weighing in again.

"What now?" Moshe sighed as if at the end of his patience.

"They believe his given name may be . . . Jesus."

*Whoa!* Nobody said it, but everybody thought it. Or better, *felt* it.

This was too much, over the top for reserved shepherds. The long hours of that night slipped by quickly as each mind was awl, trying to make sense of these things.

Again, days became weeks; and weeks, months. Soon they were on their way to Jerusalem for Passover. But they all knew that this time they were not merely there to sell lambs; they were there to find Jesus again.

The city was as crowded, maybe more so, than in past visits. But there was something in the air other than the electricity of large crowds. It was hard to put a finger on it. Between sales and even in the midst of arguing the value of a lamb, there seemed to be something heavy in the air, confusion maybe, or fear . . . something ominous; something undeniable, but indefinable.

They inquired, when they could and without trying to look too obvious, about Jesus. But the reports were mixed—praise on one hand, poison on the other. The tides of public opinion were changing and the prints Jesus had left on the hearts of the masses were being washed away.

Late Thursday afternoon the last of their lambs were sold. They were free now to move about the city, seeking to see and hear Jesus. People had seen him that week, that much was clear. But no one could tell them now where he might be.

The next morning they sought again, but were met with suspicious expressions and evasive answers. Something was up, but just what they could not tell. Just then they heard a commotion at the end of the street. People shouted, women screamed, children first ran for a look then fled in tears.

Eli, Amos, Shlomo, Moshe, and Uri raced to the end of the street and pressed through the crowds. They arrived just in time to see a gruesome parade disappearing around the next

corner—all appearing to be centered around a bloodied, beaten form slumped under a heavy wooden cross.

Then they heard it—all at the same moment—the name “Jesus!”

*What? That was Jesus? How? Why?* The questions tumbled commonly through each of their minds without the aid of conversation.

And their feet began to move in unison and with speed. As if in some previously agreed upon plan, they lit out in the direction of the parade.

They didn’t catch up with the crowds till they were outside the city. There they followed at a distance up the hill called Golgotha. In stunned silence they watched as the shredded form of humanity was thrown upon the cross, nailed hands and feet to the beams, and the whole dropped with a stomach-wrenching thud into the hole hewn in the solid rock.

There they stood agape. Silent. Uncomprehending, but unwilling to flee. Hours flowed by as they kept their silent, stupefied vigil.

The skies grew dark; blackness settled over them, over the entire land. Darkness they knew—they worked the nightshift after all. But this was more than the absence of light, there was something fuller, heavier about this. There was something almost spiritual about it.

The crowds thinned. They’d gotten their fill of gore and moved on to other attractions. No one counted how many remained or sized them up to figure out why they might have stayed. All were transfixed by the figure on the center cross.

Neither Eli nor the others had really noticed just how huddled they’d become with a handful of others who were there. Strangers, but somehow, not, welded in a fellowship they had not pursued and did not desire. Eli became cognizant of this, however, when one of them—a young man standing nearly shoulder to shoulder with him—seemed to say, almost subconsciously and under his breath, “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.”

“What’s that?” Eli found himself saying, turning his head momentarily to see who had said this.

“Isaiah,” the man mumbled without moving his fixed gaze from the form before him.

Each retreated again into their silence.

But then it was Eli’s turn to mutter without realizing he was audibly speaking, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

There's no way Jesus could have heard him. The guy next to him hadn't even seemed to. But at that precise moment Jesus lifted His head and through stringy locks of hair matted with drying blood and through bruised and swollen eyes, his gaze met that of Eli.

These were the same eyes that had fixed him in the market. And there it was again—that *something* in his eyes. A penetrating, soul-boring, heart-piercing something. It was so powerful Eli was surprised it didn't hurt. But the sensation felt more like love!

And suddenly Eli realized—right there, eye-to-eye with Jesus in the last moments of his life —Eli realized, *He heard me! And he knows.*

Though there was the sound of approaching death in his breathing, there was love in Jesus' eyes. And they held Eli in their gaze for an eternal moment of redemptive interchange.

Then Jesus head bowed again as his agonies spiked.

But Eli would never escape that gaze. His thoughts ran wild within him: *He knows! He knows me! He knows that I know. He was there, that night—not just in a manger, but on the wrong side of the ridge. While the angels announced his birth to my buddies, he was walking the other side of the hill, the “wrong” side of the hill ... looking, seeking ...*

The thoughts in Eli's head became words in his mouth and Amos, Moshe, Uri, and Shlomo heard the soft words rise from his lips, “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.”

“What's that?” Amos muttered.

“He knows!” is all Eli could whisper.

So lost in his agonizing thoughts that he wasn't conscious he was even speaking audibly, the man next to him said, “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth.”

And so the scene played out. Each one stayed on, all five of them, watching to the bitter end.

After Jesus' body was taken down from the cross they silently put one foot in front of the other and headed toward Bethlehem. Time seemed to stand still—or did it rush on, none could tell or gave it a thought, so lost were they in their questions and the emotions provoked by what they'd experienced.

A few nights later, each one had taken his place on the hillside, his flock nestled into the grass below him. Suddenly Moshe broke upon the scene—running, jumping, screaming

something that thus far remained indecipherable. It's not too much to say it was almost reminiscent of the way all four had rushed to Eli that night over thirty years before.

Between gasps for air Shlomo's words tumbled out in fragments of sentences. But soon enough they got the point. Reports coming out of Jerusalem are saying Jesus is alive. But how could that be? His tomb is empty. His followers demand he is alive, that they've actually seen him. Predictably, the authorities are livid, and desperate to silence this as a false report.

Night or not, flocks or not, provisioned or not, the five lit out, racing back to Jerusalem to investigate for themselves.

Upon arrival and with a little work, they were able to locate the fledgling company of Jesus-followers. They listened carefully to the first hand accounts. It was all so hard to comprehend, but it was obvious these people had encountered something or someone out of this world.

Caught up in the fellowship, hearing the stories again and again, the days flowed one into another. Momentum was gaining ground. More and more people were joining their company—some merely curious, other soundly convinced.

And then one day, as some five hundred of them were all together in prayers, he came among them. *Jesus stood in their midst!* Glorious, shining, regal! Every mouth stopped. Every eye was upon him—drinking in the glory of his splendor.

And then, it seemed to Eli, Jesus turned and again fixed him with his eyes. These were the same eyes that had locked on him first in the market and then later from the cross, but they now were somehow different. The love in them was the same, but the commanding power had been multiplied!

And though no words were exchanged and Eli to this day couldn't tell you how long that eye-exchange between the two actually lasted, Jesus' gaze changed Eli forever. Never—not through a thousand eternities—could he (or would he ever want to!) escape that loving, Lordly look from Jesus.

And then a fragment of a memory, a single sentence hidden in the back of Eli's brain was drawn into conscious thought by some force he could neither locate nor resist: "I know my own and my own know me."

A reverent, worshiping smile spread over Eli's face and he uttered, "He knows!"

And in the same instance he equally realized that he himself knew—knew things he'd never understood before, knew them in a way that was more than information, but in a way in which knowing became transforming.

In a flash, with the look of Jesus eyes, Eli understood that he himself, the lowly shepherd, had all along really been a sheep—a lost lamb. He understood that he had gone his own way, but the Savior—this Jesus—was *the* Shepherd, the Good Shepherd. And Eli had now been found by Him. There came also the realization that finally he was no longer on the outside looking in. All five—Eli, Amos, Moshe, Shlomo, and Uri—like the other 495 like-souls around them, were fixated upon the triumphant, shining Savior-Shepherd standing in their midst.

And though He may have to depart visibly, they instinctively knew He would never leave them. They would never again be lost and alone ... or on the outside looking in.