

The Shepherd and His Flock

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“He shall feed his flock like a shepherd.” (Isaiah 40:11).

Since these words obviously refer to the Lord Jesus Christ in His tender and constant care toward His people, an introduction to them is hardly necessary. There are three words in our text on which I should like to dwell this morning. They are the “shepherd”, the “flock” and the “feeding”. Let us consider these.

I: The Shepherd.

Christ is before us in the written Word under many glorious names. Each of these carries its own heavenly fragrance, for “His name is as ointment poured forth”. To all who believe on His name He is truly precious under whatsoever name the Holy Spirit brings Him before them in His Word. And there can be few of His names more endearing to His people than this one. How often, for example, are our affections moved by the words of the Psalm:

The Lord is my shepherd”. The Father Himself addresses Him under this name. “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the Lord of Hosts.” And this is the name by which He brought Himself so often before His people in the days of His humiliation here. “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews he is designated as **“that great Shepherd of the sheep”**. And wherein does His greatness consist? He is, in His Person and Being, the Eternal Son of God equal to the Father and to the Holy Spirit both in power and glory. All the attributes of the Godhead belong to Him in their unchanging fullness and perfection. He is the ever-living “I am”. This is how He spoke of Himself while He was in this world. “Before Abraham was, I am.” Those — and there are many such in this day of blasphemy and unbelief — who would reduce Him to the level of a mere man have to contend with the witness of God Himself on this claim.

It was, indeed, necessary that He who was to redeem us to God should be equal to God Himself. Sin brought such dishonour upon the glory and majesty of God that He could never accept satisfaction or atonement from any being lower than Himself. That Christ was in no respect lower than God in His Being is, to give one instance, clearly shown by God Himself where He speaks of Him “my Fellow” or “mine equal”. Only He could satisfy Divine justice, endure the penalty of a broken law and of a violated covenant. Only He could or would endure the stroke of that sword which the justice of God must inflict upon Him as the surety and substitute of His people. Only God could break the dread sway of sin, and put it away for ever. Only He could have borne the burden of imputed sin which would, otherwise, have crushed and destroyed all humanity for ever. When He entered this world, therefore, in our nature, He took all the perfections of Deity with Him. He was “Emmanuel, God with us.”

It was necessary also that He who was to suffer and die must also be man. It was man who sinned and God the Father could not therefore in justice lay the penalty of sin on one who was not also a true man. He took our nature that in our nature He might die — the just in the room of the unjust. It is the infinite greatness of the Person which lends dignity, efficacy and glory to His finished work of redemption.

In the Gospel our Lord speaks also of Himself as “**The good Shepherd**”. What the Church, both in Heaven and on earth, sees in his coming into the world to die for her is the greatness of His love. He loved all His people with an everlasting love. Why He loved us we cannot tell. We sinned against Him. We hated Him without a cause. We despised and rejected Him. We nailed Him to the tree and put Him to open shame; but in spite of all this He loved us to the end. “Greater love hath no man than this that a man should lay down His life for his friends”. But, as we were by nature, we were not His friends but His enemies. Only when he changed our hearts, and gave us the spirit of repentance, did we become His friends. O! the wonder of His love as we see it in contrast to all our ill-deservings. Is it any wonder that the theme of the songs of the redeemed in the heavenly world should be: “Unto Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood”? As in the case of Paul who spoke of himself as “the chief of sinners”, each one of His people puts himself or herself in the same category and shall wonder, through all eternity, at the love which embraced them and rescued them.

And how thankful we should be that this love is united to infinite power. “All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth.” Satan “the son of mischief” took all humanity out of the hand of the first Adam. We all sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression. But Satan can never take any of God’s elect out of Christ’s hand. “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish neither shall any man pluck them out of mine hand.” They are kept by the power of God. On the great day He shall give an account to the Father of all for whom He died. “Behold I and the children whom God hath given me.” Satan’s power is great; so is the power of sin, but Christ’s power, love and faithfulness stands between us and all that would destroy us.

God's word also speaks of our Lord as "**The chief Shepherd**" of His sheep. "And when the chief Shepherd shall appear ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away."

On the natural level there are some who leave their flocks under the care of their servants. The sheep belong to them; but they give them no personal attention. Some, indeed, would consider it beneath their dignity to attend personally to their flocks. Now Christ, as the Head of the Church and the King of Zion, has ordained and appointed angels and men to care for His flock in this lower vale. Angels are ministering spirits who are sent forth to minister to those who are heirs of salvation. They watch over them night and day. They keep them in all their ways. The Lord also has chosen men who care for the spiritual welfare of His people. Peter, after his profession of love to Christ, was commanded to feed His sheep and lambs. Such men should manifest their love to Christ by their love to His people. The Lord has a called, converted and devoted ministry within His Church on earth who attend to the spiritual needs of His people. But, however faithful and loving all such may be, the Lord does not, in the highest sense, leave His people under their care. He Himself is **the chief Shepherd**. When Moses was offered an angel to lead God's Israel through the great and terrible wilderness into the place of their rest, he said: "If thy presence go not with me carry us not up hence." Under God's hand he was a shepherd himself, and he knew the value of angelic protection and care, but only under the wings of the Eternal would he feel safe. Under the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night would he know that no harm could befall them. Above and beyond all that man and angels could do was His own unfailing care. How sweet to the believing soul are those Psalms which speak of this.

**"But his own people like to sheep
thence to go forth He made.
And he amidst the wilderness
them, as a flock did lead."**

**"Thy foot he'll not let slide,
nor will He slumber that thee keeps,
Behold he that keeps Israel
He slumbers not, nor sleeps."**

We seek, as we ought to do, to keep ourselves unspotted from the world and, by His grace to persevere in the way of His commandments. This is the desire and resolve of God's people. But while all the people of God ever strive to do so, their faith rests on Him who alone is the Keeper of Israel: for they know that without Him they could do nothing. It was this that gave such unspeakable comfort to the Psalmist. "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel and afterward receive me to glory."

Think also of the **sympathy and love of the Shepherd** toward His flock. In the natural world the shepherd, however tender and faithful, cannot understand how the weary or enfeebled sheep or lamb may feel in the way. There may be a hidden instinctive pain of which the shepherd can know nothing. This is so because they belong to two different dimensions of existence. There is a fundamental difference of nature. Our Lord,

however, has a human nature as well as the Divine. He is, therefore, touched with a feeling of our infirmities. "In all their afflictions He was afflicted." In this world He was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." "Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." His sympathy with His afflicted people is, therefore, very real. He has passed through all our sorrows. Although in Him was no sin, all our weaknesses, perplexities, trials and hidden griefs were in His cup. Our tears and our wounded spirits touch him as they cannot touch our nearest friends on earth. His people are the apple of His eye. He knows our frame. He knows our enemies. He knows our burdens. He also knows that many of our sufferings are due to our attachment to Him, and to His cause in this world. "For thy sake are we killed all the day, we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." One wonder of His care over us is the way He adapts Himself to our personal states. He leadeth gently those that are with young. He carries the lambs to His bosom. He applies His balm to the hurts of those who suffer for His sake. When they are ready to halt He gives them rest. "As a beast goeth down into the valley the Spirit of the Lord caused them to rest; so didst thou lead thy people to make thyself a glorious name." (Is. 63). How sweet to know then that nothing will ever emerge in our lives but He is ever beside each one of us. "The Lord is my Shepherd." "I will fear no evil for Thou art with me."

The next word in our text that we would look at is:

II. The Flock

The Lord speaks in His Word of His people here as "a little flock". Some think that this phrase is a term of endearment. And so it is. But it is also a word which enables us to see that, in comparison to the rest of the world, the Lord's people have often, if not always, been small in number. There have been times when they were few, feeble and hidden. Although the Lord — and we should bless His name for it — has much people in the world today — they are still, compared to the teeming masses of humanity, "a very small remnant." But they are the salt of the earth. It is for the Elect's sake that God bears with us. For their sake He shortens the days of anguish. In the ultimate sense, however, those who make up Christ's flock are not a small number. They are "a great multitude which no man could number." When Abraham, at God's command, looked at the stars of heaven He said to him, "so shall thy seed be". And we know that all the stars which grace the universe are known only to God. They are in their number utterly beyond human calculation. We believe also that the day is coming when God's people shall make the earth resound with His praise. He is going to bring His sons from afar and His daughters from the ends of the earth till, among Jew and Gentiles, the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

But coming nearer to our theme we ask a question. How may we identify His people in this world? What are their peculiar marks? The Lord's people may differ in many ways within the context of their individual Christian experience, but they have also so many things in common. For one thing they all love the Lord Who redeemed them. Whatever their own feelings and fears if they are His, His love is shed abroad in their hearts by the

Holy Spirit who dwells in them. "Whom having not seen, ye love." "The righteous love thee." Peter, newly out of the devil's sieve, and still under a cloud of fear and shame, could say, "Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee." The flood of the adversary could not extinguish that flame of love to Christ which beamed through his spirit. We are not always conscious of our love to Christ. It is often a hidden grace which shows itself in other ways.

The evidence of their love to Him is really seen in their spiritual discernment and obedience. They know the Shepherd's voice. To the Church in the Song of Solomon Christ's voice had no counter part in Heaven or on earth. "The voice of my beloved." "No man ever spake like this man." "Cause me", was the prayer of David, "to hear thy voice for in Thee do I trust." They say that, naturally speaking, sheep can distinguish between the voice of the shepherd and all other voices. The imitation of his voice may be almost perfect; but the false voice never deceives them.

God's true people listen only to God's Word. The false shepherd and there are many such in our day — whose voice deviates from God's Word they ignore and reject. This has often involved them in sufferings and death. Throughout the long day of historical time many of them suffered for their devotion to Christ and His Word. Rather than forsake His Word, or leave the way of holiness and truth, many of them chose and welcomed death.

Not only are they bound to the way, but their hearts are also bound to those who are with them in the way. How beautifully is this seen, for example, in the life of Ruth as she said an everlasting farewell to her people and her gods. "Whither thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people and thy God my God." The love of Bunyan's pilgrims for the way was of a part with their love to Christ and to one another. God was their companion and guide. And they had fellowship with Him and with one another both in their joys and sorrows. A good Christian girl was once on the eve of leaving her home for one of our Scottish cities. She was concerned as to where she could find true Christian fellowship and food for her soul. At the Throne of Grace she addressed the Lord in these words: "Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon." When she arrived in the city she sat on the Sabbath evening in a certain Church, and great was her astonishment when the minister preached from these very words. There her soul found rest and nourishment for many days.

Another mark which is peculiar to the flock of God is that they are reconciled to the Lord's hand when He brings them under the rod of correction. If sheep are often foolish and apt to go astray so are the Lord's people sometimes. If they heed not His voice which says, "This is the way, walk ye in it", they may come under His loving chastisement. But, however sore these trials, He will not give them over to death. "The Lord hath me chastised sore, but not to death given over."

Satan may at times insinuate that His chastisements are not the tokens of His love but of His displeasure. But He gives them the needed grace whereby they are able to "hear

the rod” and Him who appoints it. Not till we reach our heavenly home shall we see the wisdom and love of God in the ordering of His providence. Can we not even now, with so much of our Christian life in retrospect, thank Him for the use of His rod when we were apt to go astray into the way of danger?

Let us now say a word on:

III. The Feeding

The great end for which Christ came into the world was that His flock might have life and have it more abundantly. He who is their resurrection out of a state of spiritual death is also their sustaining life. Of His fulness they all receive and grace for grace. As sheep, naturally, are clean creatures, the Lord’s people, as new creatures in Christ, are conscious of new desires which only God can satisfy. The evidence of their regeneration is that they hunger and thirst after righteousness. Reclaimed and redeemed from the “far country” of sin, they no longer desire the husks which graceless men and women live on. They have for ever left the impoverished and unclean fare of a degenerate world. Their Shepherd has furnished their table with the wholesome food and drink of the heavenly Canaan.

When God brought His people out of Egypt He gave them manna from heaven and water out of the smitten rock. And the spiritual Israel feed on the pastures of His Word. The Word of God is their life in every age. “Thy words were found and I did eat them.” It is by “the sincere milk of the Word” that His lambs are nourished. His people confess that “His mouth is most sweet”. It is, in other words, through the channel of His Word, that He communicates His grace to their souls. The words which He speaks to them are life and truth. Exercised Christians read the Word and love to hear it expounded in the public means of grace. God says to them each day: “Arise and eat because the journey is too great for thee.”

Inseparable from this pasture is the practice of prayer. “Give us this day our daily bread.” “Evermore give us this bread.” God did not bring the manna into the houses of the Israelites. Nor did He place it in their mouth. They had to go out into the fields and gather it. Ruth had to glean on the fields of Boaz for her daily bread. Those who neglect the means of grace God will not bless. Family worship and public worship go together. If the one is persistently neglected the other becomes an empty formality. There are those who say that they can worship God in their homes without going to His House, but in so saying they dishonour God. We are to keep His Sabbaths and reverence His sanctuary. But God’s children have also secret dealings with the Lord in prayer. It is in the secret place that they often enjoy more of His presence, and that He supplies their needs according to His riches in Christ. In all the means of grace they open their mouth in prayer and desire, and He fills it. They extend the hand of faith toward Him and He gives them a token for good.

We mentioned how the Lord uses His rod of chastisement for their safety; and does He not also feed them on bitter herbs, and give them the waters of Marah to drink? There

are seasons when instead of bread to eat they are given tears of sorrow. The cup which He puts to their mouth is not always sweet. The sorrows of the flock come from many sources. "In this world ye shall have tribulation." But it only lasts "for a small moment". Soon, very soon, He shall wipe all tears from their eyes. There are no bitter herbs, no waters of Marah, in Heaven. Sorrow and sighing shall for ever flee away. "And now ye have sorrow, but I shall see you again and your heart shall rejoice and your joy no man taketh from you."

Dear friend, do you know the Lord as your shepherd? Do you bear the marks of His Own? Do you feed at their table? Let me end my remarks with a little story. It is that of a well-trained elocutionist who once at the request of some friends repeated the twenty-third Psalm. So impressed were many by his art that when he finished there was the sound of subdued, and respectful applause. In that company there was an elderly Christian man who also, in a halting and broken voice — and not without much feeling — repeated the Psalm. When he finished some were in tears. "How is it," someone asked the master of elocution, "that when you repeated the Psalm some applauded but none wept; but when the other repeated it he brought tears to our eyes?" His answer was, "The difference between us is this: I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd." My friend you also knew the Psalm from your mother's knee, perhaps. But do you know the Shepherd? "And this is life eternal that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent."

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