

THE GOOD SHEPHERD... AND HIS WANDERING SHEEP

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. (Ps. 23:1)

The twenty-third psalm is the best loved of all David's compositions; it is appreciated by people of all nations and creeds. The relationship that existed between a shepherd and his sheep was understood by the king of Israel, who in his youth led his father's flock on the hills and fields of Bethlehem. His courage in protecting the animals against the savage attacks of the bear and lion became known and later influenced King Saul to permit the youth to engage in combat against Goliath, the champion of the Philistine army.

Age sometimes impairs memory but it is not difficult to remember the events of one's youth. For example, it is easy for this writer to recall things that happened seventy years ago, but hard to remember where I put the car keys yesterday! David was elderly when he wrote this psalm. When he reminisced it was easy for him, in thought, to lead his sheep into green pastures and beside still waters. The king of Israel saw in his boyhood occupation the foreshadowing of his relationship with Jehovah.

An identical emphasis may be found throughout the sacred writings. All Hebrews were interested in sheep. Wool was made into clothing, meat satisfied hunger, trade supplied money, and sacrifice obtained forgiveness. Sheep were essential for the survival of the chosen race. It was to be expected that kings and prophets, traders and civilians, were interested in these animals. The celebration of the Passover feast regularly reminded the nation how their lives had been spared when they placed the blood of a lamb on the doorposts of their houses in Egypt.

The Savior called Himself the Good Shepherd and said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). The writers of the New Testament mentioned the same theme: "Jesus,

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that great Shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. 13:20); "the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls" (1 Peter 2:25); "the chief Shepherd shall appear" (1 Peter 5:4). When some of these references are considered together, the Shepherd-sheep relationship becomes fascinating.

The Shepherd's Compassion ... He loves us  
I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. (John 10:11)

Shepherds were known for feeding and protecting their sheep (see Jer. 31:10); for seeking lost animals (see Ezek. 34:11); and their courage in times of danger (see Amos 3:12). Abel, the son of Adam, was a shepherd until he was killed by his brother, Cain, and afterward Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob followed the noble profession. When Samuel asked Jesse if he had another son, he was told about David who was caring for the sheep. David entertained himself and his flock when he played his instrument and sang melodies in the fields surrounding Bethlehem. The sheep and their young master shared a mutual love. When the lion and the bear attacked the flock, David risked his life on their behalf. Any faithful shepherd would have acted similarly.

Many years later the Savior said, "I am the good shepherd." John supplied a postscript for that statement when he wrote, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Jesus said, "I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15). Writing to the Christians in Ephesus, Paul

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said, "Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:2). As David the shepherd boy destroyed the enemies of the sheep, so the Great Shepherd met the challenge of Satan at the cross of Calvary. Paul wrote to the Colossians saying, "And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew over them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Col. 2:15). "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends [sheep]" (John 15:13).

The Shepherd's Concern ... He lost us

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way. (Isa. 53:6)

It has often been claimed that, unlike other animals, the natural instinct of sheep is to wander. Cows, horses, and even pigeons and

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chickens come home to roost, but when left to themselves, sheep wander. Jesus expressed that fact when he saw the multitude and "was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd" (Matt. 9:36, emphasis mine).

The fact that the human race has been straying from God may be seen in the history of nations. The fellowship that God hoped to enjoy with our first parents was terminated when they were expelled from their garden home. Many years later, when the book of Judges was compiled, evidence was submitted that proved the children of Israel were always wandering from God. They committed sin and then repented, asking Jehovah to forgive their indiscretions. When their requests were granted, they repeated their sinful acts and forgot their Benefactor. The continuing patience of the Lord beggared description. Each time this happened God endeavored to reclaim, in one way or another, His erring children. It has always been difficult to understand why this attribute was always present in the dealings of God with men and women. It was expressed when Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:9-10).

There are many ways by which the Lord seeks lost sheep. It has been said, "Affliction is the Good Shepherd's black dog!" Problems snap at our heels to suggest a move in a new direction. God's desire to locate and rescue lost sheep is so intense that He never hesitates to use the black dogs at His disposal.

The Shepherd's Constraint... He looks for us

How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. (Matt. 18:12-13)

The Savior was an expert in the art of painting word pictures. With a few sentences, He described a man counting ninety-nine sheep within the fold, the intensity of two eyes looking at distant mountains, and the search for a missing animal. It became easy for listeners to visualize the seeker climbing over rocks and peering into gloomy crevices. Those

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who were present when the Lord uttered this parable could almost hear the voice of the seeker as he continued calling the lost animal. The

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overwhelming relief that shone on the shepherd's face when he obtained a response was then compared with the joy of angels when a sinner is converted. Luke recorded significant details to this story: "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (Luke 15:4-7, emphasis mine). The Savior often spoke of lost things being found (see Luke 15:8-9, 31-32). The power of the shepherd's love constrained him to continue searching until his effort was rewarded.

The Shepherd's Commitment... He lifts us

I waited patiently for the LORD; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. (Ps. 40:1-2)

David compared his life's experiences with those he performed on behalf of helpless sheep. Elizabeth C. Clephane expressed these truths in her immortal poem:

But none of the ransomed ever knew  
How deep were the waters crossed;  
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through  
Ere He found His sheep that was lost.

But all through the mountains thunder-river,  
And up from the rocky steep:  
There arose a cry to the gate of Heaven  
"Rejoice, I have found my sheep."  
And the angels echoed around the throne,  
"Rejoice for the Lord brings back His own."

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Dr. W. M. Thomson, the famous archaeologist, traveler, and authority on Palestine, often stayed with the shepherds and his comments are enlightening:

The shepherd goes before, not merely to point out the way, but to see it is practical and safe. He is armed in order to defend his charge, and in this he is very courageous. Many adventures with wild beasts occur not unlike those recounted by David, and in these very mountains; for although there are now no more lions here, there are wolves in abundance, and leopards, and panthers exceeding fierce, prowl among the waddies. They not infrequently attack the flock in the very presence of the shepherd, and he must be ready to do battle at a moment's warning. I have listened with intense interest to their graphic descriptions of downright and desperate fights with these savage beasts. And when the thief and the robber come (and come they do), the faithful shepherd has often to put his life in hand to defend his flock. I have known more than one case in which he had literally to lay it down in the contest. A poor faithful fellow, between Tiberias and Tabor, instead of fleeing, actually fought three Bedouin robbers until he was hacked to pieces with their khanjars, and died among the sheep he was defending." (W. M. Thomson, The Land and the

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Book [London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1910], 179-180)

The Shepherd's Company... He leads us  
And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them,  
and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. (John 10:4)

Throughout the western world the movements of sheep are controlled by dogs, in the Middle East by affection and obedience to the calls of the shepherd. Here, the man in charge of the flock follows the sheep; in Arab lands, the animals follow their master. This is expressed in the Savior's words in John 10:4. Continuing his remarks, Dr. Thomson said,

Some sheep always keep near the shepherd, and are his special favorites. Each of them has a name to which it answers joyfully, and the kind shepherd is ever distributing to them choice portions which he gathers for that purpose. These are the contented and happy ones. They are in no danger of getting lost or into mischief, nor do the wild beasts or thieves come near them. The great body,

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however, are mere worldlings intent upon their own pleasures or selfish interests. They run from bush to bush searching for variety or delicacies, and only now and then, lift their heads to see where their shepherd is. Others are restless and discontented, jumping into everybody's field, climbing into bushes, and even into leaning trees, from which they often fall and break their limbs. These cause the shepherd continuous trouble... I have repeatedly seen a silly goat or sheep running hither and hither and piteously bleating after the lost flock. This calls forth from their dens the wild beasts of prey, or bring up the lurking thief who quickly silences its cries in death. (W. M. Thomson, The Land and the Book, 180)

Evidently, the shepherd's favorite sheep are they who remain close to his side, who recognize his voice, and enjoy the special delicacies provided. Other sheep who follow at a distance often get into trouble. It is not difficult to relate these facts to the human sheep who profess to follow the Good Shepherd. Choice Christians remain close to their Lord, rejoice to hear His voice, and never hesitate to obey His commands. They enjoy fellowship undesired by other members of the same company. The foolish sheep love to explore prohibited places but when they are chided, sulk, considering their treatment to be harsh and unwarranted; they are wanderers.

All pastors are aware of the sheep who love to eat in other fields! No sheep ever feels the soothing hand of its shepherd unless it stays close to his side.

I am Thine, O Lord, I have heard Thy voice,  
And it told Thy love to me,  
But I long to rise in the arms of faith,  
And be closer drawn to Thee.

Draw me nearer, nearer, nearer blessed Lord,  
To the Cross where Thou hast died.  
Draw me nearer, nearer, nearer blessed Lord,  
To Thy precious, wounded side.  
—Fanny I. Crosby



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