

THE SHEPHERD AND HIS SHEEP

by Ray C. Stedman

No part of Scripture is better loved than the 23rd Psalm. Many Christians have read it in times of pressure and of danger. The Lord is indeed our Shepherd. He leads us in paths of righteousness; he makes us lie down in green pastures; he leads us beside still waters; he takes us through places of danger and darkness. What a comforting thing it is to know we have such a Shepherd.

In the 10th chapter of John, Jesus assumes the role of the Shepherd of the sheep. By the way, he is not a shepherder. I grew up in Monta-a-ana where there are lots of sheep. There, shepherders were considered the lowest form of life and were not very highly regarded in Montana society. They were hired to take care of the sheep. Sometimes they did a good job and sometimes they did not. But I have learned there is a great deal of difference between a Western shepherder and an Eastern shepherd in the way they care for their flocks. In this section of John we have a picture of Jesus as the Shepherd, not the shepherder, of the sheep.

Our Lord builds his teaching around four figures that are taken from the life of a shepherd. In the first figure he is clearly setting himself apart as the True Shepherd of the sheep in contrast to the false shepherds. This passage follows immediately on the healing of the man born blind, who had been cast out of the synagogue because of his faith in Jesus. Jesus sees these leaders, these Pharisical rulers of the Jews who had twisted and distorted the teachings of the law, as false shepherds. "Thieves and robbers," he calls them.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens; 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." {John 10:1-5 RSV}

In the East, shepherds brought their flocks into one central sheepfold every evening where half-a-dozen flocks gathered together and were guarded by a porter or gatekeeper behind locked doors. In the morning the shepherds returned and each called his own sheep. Although the flocks had been mingled together, each flock knew its own shepherd's voice, and each would follow its own shepherd and no other. This is the picture our Lord uses with regard to the encounter between the man who had been born blind and the false shepherds, the Pharisees.

In this section we learn the marks of the True Shepherd of the sheep. Through the centuries there have been many false shepherds. Even today there are many false views of Jesus. Many people are asking, "Who is the true Jesus? Who is the true Shepherd of the sheep?" There is the Jesus of the Moonies, the Jesus of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Jesus of the Scientologists, the Jesus of the Christian Scientists, the Jesus of the Mormons, etc. Which Jesus is the true Jesus, the true Shepherd? Here Jesus tells us how to know.

There are three marks, he declares, by which we can tell the true Shepherd:

First, "He who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep." What does he mean, "the door?" He is referring, of course, to the normal, proper entrance to a sheepfold. The door is the proper entrance to this auditorium. I did not see any of you climb in through the windows or slide in under the pews this morning! You came in by the door. That is the expected way to come to church. This is what our Lord refers to here.

The prophets had predicted the way the Shepherd would come to the sheep. They had foretold where he would be born, whom he would be born to, and the unusual character of his birth. They had predicted how he would

appear to the nation, how he would be introduced, where he would live, what he would say, and what he would do when he came. This is what our Lord means. He came the predicted way, the normal, expected way.

No other person in all the history of Israel ever came to Israel this way. That is how we can know that he is the true Shepherd of the sheep. He entered by the door. He was born in Bethlehem. According to the prophet Micah that is where he would come from. He was born of a virgin. That is what Isaiah said would happen: "A virgin shall be with child," {cf, Isa 7:4}, and his name would "be called 'Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace,'" {cf, Isa 9:6}. If you ask someone, "Who is the Prince of Peace?" you will be told, "It is Jesus." He is the One who was presented in the temple as an infant, circumcised on the eighth day, according to the Law, and owned of God at his baptism. He came the accepted way. He entered by the door. "If anyone comes any other way, he is a thief and a robber," Jesus declares. But Jesus is the true Shepherd of the sheep.

The second mark is, "To him the gatekeeper opens." That "gatekeeper," of course, is John the Baptist. He opened the door. He was the "voice crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord,'" {cf, John 1:23}. John the Baptist identified Jesus in the words, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," {John 1:29 RSV}. To that Lamb "the gatekeeper opened."

The third clear and unmistakable mark is, "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." His own would recognize his voice. Four things are characteristic of this fact. The first is that he calls them by name. Notice that every encounter with Jesus in this gospel is on a personal basis. He met Nicodemus by night; he met the woman at the well of Samaria; he met the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda; he met the man born blind. In each of these encounters he met the individual personally, alone. In other gospels we read that as he walked through Jericho he saw a little man in a tree and called to him, "Zacchaeus, come down. I'm scheduled to have lunch with you!" {cf, Luke 19:5}. He met Matthew at the customs' table and told him, "Rise, and follow me," {Matt 9:9}. Through all the centuries since, every believer who has come to Jesus has come alone. Jesus never takes a group in at once. It is always you and he alone. What you believe in the silence and loneliness of your own heart about him is what makes the difference. There is where the transaction is done. "He calls his own sheep by name."

Then, fourth, "He puts them out," "he leads them out." That interesting phrase is used in Chapter 9 of the man who was born blind. The Pharisees "cast him out" of the synagogue and that is the same word employed here. Jesus is saying that, when that happened, it was not only the Pharisees doing it but it was he, himself, who was behind it; it was he who moved them to excommunicate him. He led that man out of the false teaching which they had used to keep him in spiritual blindness.

This is what it means to us as well. When Jesus calls, us he leads us out of the blindness and darkness of the world. The philosophy of the world can be summed up in one phrase: "me first." "Look out for number one, take care of number one," that is the one characteristic of the world that stands out. Everything is focused on the question, "What will it do for me? What will I get out of it?" But when a person comes to Christ almost immediately you see evidences that he has begun to think about others. In fact, the rate of Christian growth can be measured by how much a person begins to reach out to others, and to think about others instead of himself. Christianity is an others-centered religion. When you hear Christians, so-called, still focusing upon themselves, and what happens to them -- their rights, their needs, etc. -- you are listening to a fleshly substitute for Christianity. The real thing is to be led out. That is the very first thing our Lord does with us: He leads us out.

Then, third, "He goes before them." When he leads you out he does not leave you alone; he has already gone ahead of you. In every situation you have to face he has been there first. He has chosen for you every circumstance of your life as a believer. That is the great truth of Scripture that helps us handle the pressures, the dangers, and the pitfalls of life: He has gone before us. What a beautiful picture that is! The Shepherd goes before. In the words of David in the 23rd Psalm, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me," {Psa 23:4 KJV}.

And, fourth, the sheep trust his voice: "A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." A prominent Christian businessman sent me an article recently on some of

the teaching and preaching of the television evangelists who keep telling people that, if they come to Christ, God will make them rich. The man wrote across the top of the article, "There's something wrong with this!" How right he was! He recognized it was not the voice of the Shepherd. He could not put his finger on what it was, but there was something wrong. "A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." What a beautiful picture is drawn by Jesus of the true Shepherd of the sheep.

In Verses 6-10 our Lord changes the figure slightly. Here he becomes the "door" of the sheep. He puts it in a most specific way:

This figure Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not heed them. I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." John 10:6-10 RSV}

What does he mean by this figure, "I am the door of the sheep"? This is a picture taken from the middle of the work day of an Eastern shepherd. The shepherd leads his flock out of the sheepfold to the hillsides where they graze through the morning hours, and then in the early afternoon he provides a temporary shelter built of shrubs where they can rest. This is a corral-type structure within which the sheep can lie, protected from wild beasts, and it has an opening across which the shepherd himself lies so that the sheep cannot go in or out without crossing over him. This is what Jesus means in the words, "I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."

These beautiful figures indicate a further ministry of the Lord. Having called the sheep to come to him, and having led them out, there follows the ministry of understanding truth. John comments that those listening to our Lord did not understand what he was saying to them, "So Jesus again said to them, 'I am the door.'" By that he means the door to understanding truth. The Pharisees, whom he had called "thieves and robbers," had stolen the truth. In the case of the man born blind they had robbed him of the true meaning of the Sabbath, the true meaning of the Law, and the meaning of the shepherd. So here Jesus is saying, "I am the way to understand truth about life." As in the case of the blind man, the sheep did not heed these false teachers. Remember in Chapter 9 that the blind man was amazed at these leaders. He said to them, "What a marvel! You know so much, but you do not know this man who has opened my eyes. There has never been a miracle like that in all the history of the world, and you don't seem to know who he is. What a strange thing," {cf, John 9:30-33}. The man pays no heed to them at all. That is what Jesus says will happen to his true sheep. They will be given an understanding so they will not follow error.

As you grow in the Lord you begin to understand truth and get an insight into life that the world knows nothing about. Despite all the proud, pretentious claims of secular minds to understand science, art, literature, history and the things of men, they are still afflicted by a profound blindness of which they are unaware. That is why the world is always in a mess. Politicians cannot solve that mess. The Democrats, the Republicans -- even Jesse Jackson -- cannot solve these problems. There is an understanding of life revealed unto babes that is hidden to the wise and the prudent. As you approach the Scriptures through the door of the mind of Christ that is what you will find.

First, you will find salvation. That means not only the new birth, a new life, eternal life, but it primarily means salvation from a wasted life. When Billy Graham came to the Cow Palace in San Francisco in 1958 we ran busloads of young people to the crusade. Following a great meeting one evening I sat on the bus on the return trip beside a young man who had gone forward. I said to him, "I don't know what this means to you, but one thing you can be sure of: It means you don't have to fear death any more." I will never forget what he said in reply. He told me, "You know, I don't fear death. I don't think I have ever been afraid to die. What I am afraid of is that I will waste my life." I was happy to assure him that that is exactly what the Lord would save him from if he walked with him.

Isn't it strange that we can spend the best part of our lives making money, becoming successful, and getting ahead, and find at the end that we have wasted our lives. All the good things, the joyful things, the things of peace, the things that make for a sense of accomplishment have slipped by and we have missed them all. That is what is called "destination sickness," the malaise of arriving at where you always wanted to be and finding that you do not want anything you've got. Many people are suffering from that disease. But Jesus promises, "If you enter the door" -- if you begin to understand what he has taught -- you will be saved from that.

More than that, you will "go in and out." This is a beautiful figure. To go into the fold means to find security. This is a desperate need in this hour. Last week I read in the newspapers of three major communities where people are simply stunned by the number of teenage suicides that have occurred this past year. Fine young people, well educated, from good families are taking their own lives suddenly, without warning. Why? Because the future seems so bleak and barren. There is no security left in this world. A terrible nuclear threat hangs over our heads; insecurity is felt in our jobs, constant changes in life are hitting all the time. No one feels secure. But the wonderful thing about this Shepherd is that, when you know him, you will have a sense of security. You are with the One who is in charge of all things. "All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me," Jesus declared to his disciples following his resurrection {cf, Matt 28:18 KJV}. Thus you can find security.

But more than that, you will have liberty; you can go out into the world again. Jesus himself said to his disciples, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves." Does that sound like where you work? Are there wolves there ready to snap at you, chew you up, and spit you out? Well, here is One who can go with you. The Shepherd is with you, thus you have the liberty to move out into life in any dimension. You have both security and liberty.

Then what? You will "find pasture," he promises. That is nourishment -- food for the soul, for the mind, for the heart. In Washington last week I went up to the Capitol and gained an appointment with Senator Mark Hatfield. It was a busy day for him. He had just flown in from another city and he had to leave in a few minutes to go to the Senate chamber where they were scheduled to vote on the prayer amendment. When I entered his office the first thing he did was to take a Bible and read to me some verses from the Gospel of Mark that had nourished him and blessed his heart as he was flying into Washington that very morning. They were verses describing the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and how it was clear that he did not want to die. Our Lord was only 33. He hated the thought of death, but he knew his Father wanted him to die for the purpose for which he came into the world. Senator Hatfield shared with me how much that meant to him. We had a wonderful time together feeding upon the riches of the Word of God. I do not know how anybody who is a believer can fail to read and study the Scriptures. They are so rich in feeding our hearts and keeping us strong and nourished.

Then the familiar words, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." An abundant life! Not just surviving, barely making it from day to day, but a life filled with joy and peace and love. Those are the three great provisions, the daily elements of our inheritance in Jesus. An abundant life, of course, means a life filled with excitement and adventure. I look back now on almost 50 years of walking with the Lord, and I want to tell you I could not have chosen a more exciting life than the one God has given me. It is filled with constant expectation of what is coming next. Sometimes it is dangerous, sometimes it hurts, but it is filled with a sense of adventure. That is what Jesus means by "the abundant life."

I do not know how young people can choose any other kind of life. What the world offers is very pale in comparison. This is the life of continual adventure. I came away from Washington, my heart bursting with the joy of seeing what God was doing behind the scenes in our nation's capital through Christians who have learned how to follow the Shepherd and work in ways that he makes clear. They are actually reaching a position where they can exercise far greater influence over world affairs than those who are elected to office. They are the true government of this country, although you seldom hear their names because they work behind the scenes. Yes, I was very encouraged to see what is happening in our nation's capital. I know when we read about our government in the papers we are inclined to agree with what Will Rogers said, "We ought to be glad that we don't get as much government as we pay for!" But when you see how God works there then it is a different thing. This is indeed "the abundant life."

In the next section Jesus reverts to the figure of a shepherd.

"I am the good shepherd. [He is the true shepherd, he is the door of the sheep, and now he is the good shepherd.] The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep." {John 10:11-15 RSV}

The primary characteristic of the good shepherd is that he loves unto death; he is willing to die for the sheep. The disciples never could get over the fact that Jesus loved them so much he was willing to die for them. Many of the epistles of Paul, of John and James and Peter contain awestruck references to this. John writes in Revelation, "Unto Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood," {Rev 1:5 KJV}. Paul says in Romans, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," {Rom 5:8}; and, "He who spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him freely give us all things?" {Rom 8:32 KJV}. Peter said, "He bore our sins in his own body on the tree," {1 Pet 2:24 RSV}. The writer of the Hebrews declares, "Who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot unto God," {cf, Heb {9:14}. They are amazed that this Blessed One, this Sinless Lord, this Matchless Christ would consent to die for his own. But that is the mark of the Good Shepherd.

What a contrast with the hireling! What do all these other religious voices that we hear want from us? They want something for themselves. They regard the sheep as something to be exploited, to be used to advance and to build themselves up. When the sheep get into trouble, when the enemy comes, when the wolf (the devil) strikes, they flee, leaving the sheep to fend for themselves.

What a testimony we had along this line in the Jonestown episode. Jim Jones was looked up to and trusted as the leader of a flock, but he led the flock into murder and suicide and destruction. The Jim Joneses who speak to people today are tending in the same direction, though it may not always end in quite as disastrous a way.

Jesus declares that the end of his laying down his life is to share his life with the sheep. Notice how he puts it, "I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father."

When I was a boy growing up I always longed to have a father. My father left home when I was 10. In all those years I cannot remember that he ever showed any affection to me. He was not cruel; he just ignored me. That is probably why, as a boy, I was always sensitive to the sight of a father and a son together sharing their love with each other. God has given me four precious daughters whom I love, but also in his mercy and grace he has allowed many young men to pass through my life who have been like sons to me. It has been a rich experience to know and to share that love with these fine young men and with my own daughters.

That is what Jesus speaks of here, that intimacy of fellowship, that beauty of life which was evident in Jesus as he loved the Father and the Father loved him. This, he promises, is what comes to us as a result of laying down his life for us -- richness of fellowship -- that beauty of life which is imparted by this One who was willing to lay down his life that we may have life.

Then the final figure is what we can properly call the Great Shepherd.

"And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father." {John 10:16-18 RSV}

The wonderful benediction at the end of the letter to the Hebrews says, "May the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in

his sight, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be glory now and forever," {Heb 13:20-21 KJV}. This benediction is a reference to the fact that Jesus is the Great Shepherd.

The first thing in his work as the Great Shepherd is that he has "other sheep that are not of this fold." The fold he speaks of is the nation Israel. Here Jesus is lifting his eyes beyond the cross, beyond the resurrection, to the going forth of the gospel to all the nations of the earth. Isn't it moving to think that not one of us would be here this morning, as Gentile believers in Jesus, if he had not been willing to lay down his life for the sheep. The result of that laying down of his life was that the gospel broke out beyond the boundaries of Israel and spread throughout the earth. Here we are, at the far corners of the world, meeting as a great crowd of believers in Jesus because he laid down his life for the sheep. He brought us together so that there is one flock -- not one fold, notice, but one flock-- and one shepherd, no more than one; one church, one Lord, as Paul says in Ephesians 4. We all belong together. There are not two flocks; there is only one.

That came about because of the fact that he obeyed the Father's charge. He laid down his life. He had the power to do it. Do not let anybody ever tell you that Jesus was hounded to death or that he was crucified against his will. He chose to die. He could have prevented it; he could have resisted it. This is the meaning of the bloody sweat in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said, "If it be possible, Father, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done," {Luke 22:42 KJV}. Thus he obeyed the Father to the end. He gave himself up and took his life again that he might share it with us.

The final thing, then, in the work of the Great Shepherd is that he creates a division on earth.

There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, "He has a demon, and he is mad; why listen to him?" {John 10:19-20 RSV}

People still talk about him that way today. "Why pay any attention to him? He lived 2,000 years ago. We're much smarter, much more understanding, much better educated today. We don't go in for those primitive ideas that he taught." "He has a demon, and he is mad; why listen to him."

Others said, "These are not the sayings of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" {John 10:21 RSV}

Surely one of the most meaningful aspects to believers about Jesus is that he does for us what no one else can do. Do you feel that? No one else can satisfy your heart, no one else can solve the problems of the mind, no one can answer the questions about life after death like Jesus can. No one can touch a human situation of conflict and strife and bring healing and deliverance like Jesus can. Don't you often feel like saying, with Peter, "To whom can we go? You alone have the words of eternal life," {cf, John 6:68 RSV}.

We will conclude this service by coming to the table that speaks so eloquently of our Lord's death on our behalf. How many times in this passage does he say, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." These are the very elements that he himself designed to remind us of the costliness of our salvation. It has not been inexpensive. It was not easily done. He did not want to do it. He made himself do it on our behalf -- that we might receive the abundant life, the gifts of joy and peace, the deliverance from the guilt of our sins, and the fragrance of fellowship and companionship with him. All this is to be in our thoughts as we come to the Lord's table. I do not know how you feel, but that always awakens in me a deep sense of gratitude. Let our hearts be filled with gratitude for what the Lord has done.

Prayer:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the eternal covenant make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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