

The University Heights Messenger

April 25, 2010

The Shepherd And His Sheep

By Paul Earnhart

Shepherds and sheep were such a familiar part of the ancient world that they became a ready metaphor for biblical writers. The shepherd's tender care for his sheep moved David and his fellow psalmists to speak of the Lord as Israel's shepherd (Psalm 23; 80:1) and Israel as the "the sheep of his pasture" (Psalms 100:3; 79:13; 78:52).

The prophet also in the messianic visions saw God in a similar way: "**He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and will gently lead those that have their young**" (Isaiah 40:11). See also Ezekiel 34:15-16.

Old Testament writers also made effective use of the well known disposition of sheep to stray off. Of our sinful ways Isaiah wrote, "**All we like sheep have gone astray**" (Isaiah 53:6) and the longest of the psalms closes with this plaintive appeal: "**I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant; for I do not forget your commandments**" (Psalm 119:176).

In His illustration of the shepherd and the sheep (Luke 15:3-7; Matthew 18:12-14) Jesus was not only approaching His hearers from known practice but with a familiar biblical metaphor. There was no way for them to miss the lesson. Jesus, as did His Father, saw men as "**weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd**" (Matthew 9:35).

Sheep are usually lost through their own carelessness. Forgetting both fold and shepherd they wander aimlessly with nothing more in mind than the next clump of grass. There is no thought of wolves or steep precipices. How accurately this mirrors our own inept ways. It is not that we one day make up our minds to be

ungodly and then begin to methodically fulfill our ambition. We are merely so preoccupied with present desires and circumstances that we become heedless of the consequences of our choices. Lives lived without purpose make us pawns of our passions and, whether by design or no, we find ourselves before we know far from God, miserable in our helplessness and hurt. Such sheep do not represent the proud and stubborn but the hapless, those who are quick to own their stupidity and sin but are nonetheless lost.

But the focus of the parable is the shepherd. Arguing from the lesser to the greater Jesus takes the known attitude of a shepherd toward lost sheep to justify His attitude toward lost people, and to expose the merciless spirit of His critics. He had earlier made the same kind of argument from a physician's attitude toward the sick (Matthew 9:12). The Pharisees knew that no true shepherd would ever abandon a lost sheep even though the rest of his flock was secure. With shepherds the concern was not merely economic, but sentimental. They would often grow so attached to the sheep as to call each by its own name (2 Samuel 12:3; John 10:3).

The Pharisees also knew that the shepherd would not, upon finding his sheep, pummel it in anger, but bear the now severely weakened stray gently on his shoulders. Furthermore, when he returned, he would return with open gladness.

By this simple illustration Jesus raised an implicit question with His detractors--why they could have such compassion for a sheep and treat a man with such arrogant and self-righteous harshness. They not only had not sought the lost sinner but would not rejoice at his recovery. And in this they had dramatically shown how their disposition differed from the divine one. While God rejoices, they sulk.

While Heaven forgives, they spit their contempt. While the Good Shepherd seeks to recover the scattered flock, they live to ravage it. It is a dark picture.

But some may be puzzled by Jesus concluding observation that “**there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just (righteous) persons who need no repentance**” (Luke 15:7). Is He suggesting that God feels a lesser joy over the righteous than the recovered sinner? Two things. The joy of recovering the lost is a special kind of joy, a joy filled with relief, but it never precludes as deep a delight in that which has never been lost. And, the term *just* or *righteous* which Jesus use here has a special ironic twist to it. Who in the world would be so righteous as to need no repentance? Unfortunately, the Pharisees thought they could tell you. The truth is that all the sheep have strayed (Romans 3:9-10) and need the mercy of that great Shepherd of the sheep who redeems us “**through the blood of the everlasting covenant...**” (Hebrews 13:20). This great Shepherd will “**gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and will gently lead those that have their young**” (Isaiah 40:11).

IN NEED OF PRAYERS:

Esmeralda Agustin is struggling spiritually. Let us continue to make efforts in reaching out to her and pray that the Lord continues to show her mercy in providing time for repentance.

Glenn Kimberlin is battling pneumonia.

Rachel Crawford's aunt, Gail Stein, continues her treatments for breast cancer.

Taylor Osterling has been discharged from the hospital. Let's keep the little guy and his family in our prayers. There's nothing quite like watching your child struggle with his health and Taylor is struggling mightily.

Shannon Gilbert continues to receive her treatments for breast cancer.

Rachel Knollman is doing well with her treatments at home.

Robert Brundige, Richard's brother, is in Parkside Manor in Cynthiana dealing with some issues. **Sarah** Brundige, Richard's mother, is in Cambridge Place Nursing Home and in need of our prayer.

Let's also remember **David Day and his wife, Michelle Oxendine, Ron Catchen, Chuck McDavitt, and David Blakeman.**

UPCOMING EVENTS:

I am holding a meeting at the Lakeside congregation in Somerset this week. Thanks to Matt Thompson and Mark Wallace for taking the class and the sermons today.

BIBLE READING SCHEDULE FOR 4/25-5/1:

Sunday: Num 33-34, Ps 79, Acts 2

Monday: Num 35-36, Ps 80, Acts 3

Tuesday: Deut 1, Ps 81, Acts 4

Wednesday: Deut 2-3, Ps 82, Acts 5

Thursday: Deut 4, Ps 83, Acts 6

Friday: Deut 5-6, Ps 84, Acts 7

Saturday: Deut 7-8, Ps 85, Acts 8

SERMON TOPICS:

Sunday AM.

Sunday PM.

CLASS INFORMATION:

Lesson 13, II, F, (1 Timothy 6:17-19)