

The Flock of God

by Sewell Hall

Few animals are as helpless as sheep. With very little defense against natural enemies, little sense of direction and no ability to find their own food, they are largely dependent on man to provide their needs. In the days before fences, owners of sheep had to stay with them in the wilderness, sometimes for months at a time.

The shepherd had to provide for the sheep all that they could not provide for themselves. He searched out green pastures where they could find food (1 Chronicles 4:39-40) and gently led them there, mindful always of those "with young" (Isaiah 40:11). He even protected them with his life. Young David recounted to King Saul how he had snatched a lamb from the mouth of a lion and killed both lions and bears (1 Samuel 17).

Giving so much of himself to the care of the sheep and being so often without human companionship, the shepherd developed a close relationship with the sheep. He had a name for each one; the sheep knew his voice and came when he called (John 10:3-4). He counted the sheep each night to be sure that all were safely in the fold (Jeremiah 33:13). If even one was missing, he scoured the countryside to find it (Luke 15:4).

The helplessness of the sheep, their total dependence on the shepherd and the shepherd's love for them made this relationship one of the finest and most often used figures of God's relationship to His people. As much like sheep as we are, what a blessing to have an all-knowing, all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving God as our shepherd! David, the shepherd, expressed it so beautifully in those familiar words: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Psalm 23). David, however, could not know the absolute perfection the Divine Shepherd as we can know it, having seen Him on the cross, laying down His life for the sheep.

Owners of sheep sometimes had problems when the number of their sheep grew so large that they could not personally attend them. Fortunate, indeed, was any man like Jesse who had a son like David who would love and care for the sheep as though they were his own. All too often, the sheep had to be divided into flocks and left in the care of hirelings. Jesus explained: "He who is a hireling and not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them" (John 10:12). Jesus was actually describing the priests and teachers of His day who, as shepherds of Israel, had shown a total disregard for the sheep in their selfish pursuit of personal wealth and glory.

Today, each local congregation is a flock of God's sheep. Elders are the ones who are charged: "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3).

All too often, the picture we have of elders is "two or three men standing in a corner making decisions for the church" or sitting around a table interviewing a prospective preacher or working on a budget. Most of our prayers for them are to "rule well" (1 Timothy 5:17), but this is not their major function. Shepherds make some decisions and oversee the flock, but much more of their time is spent with the sheep, seeing to their needs and caring for them individually.

The "Chief Shepherd" has every right to expect that the shepherds of local churches reflect His own love and care for the sheep. They, too, must defend the flock (Titus 1:9-11); they must feed the sheep by laboring "in the word and in doctrine" (1 Timothy 5:17); and they must lead by "being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3). To accomplish all of this, they must know the Rock, making an effort to know each sheep by name and to be known by them. They must number the flock, not out of pride, but to know just exactly how many sheep are their responsibility. If one is missing (not just from the assembly, but from daily faithfulness), they must be ready to go and find it so that they can "warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). They should be willing to sacrifice even their lives.

Shepherds of a local flock must account for each sheep (Hebrews 13:17). Consider God's judgment on the shepherds of Israel: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves. You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them ... My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them" (Ezekiel 34:2-6).

Considering the fearful inevitability of such an accounting, who would ever "desire the office of a bishop"? The answer: only those who love the sheep so sincerely that they cannot bear to see them lacking shepherds. These are the only men whom God would have for such work, and to them is the promise: "When the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away" (1 Peter 5:4).