

The Abundant Life of Sheep

As Christians, we serve an intentional God who never misspeaks. Therefore, we must be intentional when we listen to Him speak through His word, for nothing is there by chance. I continue to be amazed by the depth of truth that can be gleaned from seemingly insignificant details of scripture.

For instance, why is it that God continually refers to His people as sheep? Most Americans would skip right over that detail, because few of us are familiar with the habits of sheep or the process of shepherding. Recently, I picked up Phillip Keller's book, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, and read it again. It had been years since I first read Mr. Keller's classic exposition on the nature of sheep. As I returned to glean again from this field, I found that once more, my faithful Shepherd had left handfuls on purpose for me to find. Twice in Psalm 23, David speaks of the need for sheep to be led by their Shepherd: "He leads me beside quiet waters" (verse 2) and "He guides me in the path of righteousness" (verse 3).

In contrast, Isaiah 53:6 paints the timeless picture of most of God's flock and unfortunately, it is the state of much of the church today. "All we like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way." The meaning of the Hebrew word for "to go astray" is: *to vacillate, to deceive, to cause to err or stagger, to be out of the way*. How many Christians are vacillating, trying to grasp Christ with one hand while they cling to old comforts and patterns with the other hand? Both Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25 tell us, "There is a way which seems right to a man, but the end is the way of death." Scripture makes this point twice for emphasis; the way of destruction seems right to us when we choose it. However, death of some kind always follows, and it is usually gradual and subtle rather than immediate. Often, we do not recognize our destructive patterns until it is too late.

Sheep have this problem, too, which is one of the reasons the Lord compares us to these creatures of habit. Phillip Keller writes:

"A commonly held, but serious misconception about sheep is that they can just 'get along anywhere.' The truth is quite the reverse. No other class of livestock requires more careful handling, more detailed direction, than do sheep. If left to themselves they will follow the same trails until they become ruts, graze the same hills until they turn to desert wastes, pollute their own ground until it is corrupt with disease and parasites."

Sheep will not seek out good pasture and clean water on their own. If their Shepherd does not lead them, they will inevitably end up in the way that leads to death. So it is with us.

Keller writes, "The stubborn, self-willed, proud, self-sufficient sheep that persists in pursuing its old paths and grazing on its old polluted ground will end up a bag of bones on ruined land." Of course, those stubborn sheep do not see themselves as stubborn. They are simply doing what seems right to them. They are too busy, too prideful, or too excited to stop and listen for the Shepherd's leading. Sometimes, they are following other sheep instead of the Shepherd Himself. Our Shepherd has promised to lead us in paths of righteousness, yet much of His flock end up as bags of spiritual bones on ruined land.

In contrast, Jesus describes the beautiful relationship that exists between an attentive shepherd and his sheep in the 10th chapter of John. "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. When he puts forth all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." (vs.3-4) Sometimes shepherds would need to put their sheep in a common area with other sheep for a period of time. Though the sheep intermingled, and you and I would never be able to tell them apart, the shepherd would know his sheep and they knew him. I have seen

shepherds calling their sheep and it is amazing. Each shepherd goes into the fold and calls, and his sheep will come out from the other sheep to follow his voice. It is truly as Jesus says in John 10:5, “a stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.” This is the relationship of trust Jesus desires to have with each of His sheep. In this same chapter, Jesus says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy, I came that they might have life and might have it abundantly.” The Greek word for abundant is *perissos*, meaning: *superabundant (in quantity) or superior (in quality); excessive, exceedingly, abundantly above, beyond measure*. It is the same thought expressed in Ephesians 3:20 when the apostle Paul wrote, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us”.

Abundant life begins at the time of our salvation. It is the lifestyle that pleases and glorifies our Shepherd. While it may not be possible to have it perfectly until we are in Heaven, scripture is clear that those who belong to Jesus should be receiving and reflecting more and more of His abundant life in this world. It is this quality of abundant life that separates us from those who are perishing, often causing them to hunger and thirst for righteousness. We cannot be used by the Lord to foster this hunger and thirst if we are not following Him on paths of righteousness. Satan cannot steal our salvation (John 10: 28-29) but he constantly schemes to steal our abundant joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self- control (Galatians 5:22).

So how do we guard against our tendency to “turn to our own way?” We must become intimately acquainted with our Shepherd’s voice. That takes time because we must “be still and know that He is God” (Psalm 46:10). Few Christians in our culture are willing to sacrifice in order to have the time to learn to know their Shepherd’s voice. One hour on Sunday will not do it. We must be purposed and intentional to invest the time alone with God and His Word. Anyone who is full of the abundant life of Jesus has sacrificed many things that our culture tells us are essential in order to “be still and know that He is God.” Ask the Lord what you need to sacrifice in order to draw closer to Him and hear His voice. It might be television, or time on the phone or the computer. It might be an extra bit of sleep in the morning, or lunch hour with your co-workers. One godly lady challenged me that in addition to my time of personal worship each morning, I needed to schedule a date with Jesus in my day timer every week and make it a priority. Some weeks, I allow myself to cave in to the demands of a busy schedule, but other weeks, by His grace, I keep that divine appointment. There is no comparison between the abundance of His life I experience when I set that extra time apart to be with Him and when I do not.

Abundant life does not come to those who make excuses as to why they cannot meet with Jesus. Read the parable in Luke 14:16-24. “*But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.’ And another one said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.’ And another one said, ‘I have married a wife and for that reason I cannot come.’*” Their excuses seemed right and necessary to them, as they do to us, but as the parable goes on to show, the end of their excuses was spiritual death. When the Shepherd calls His sheep, they follow. Ask the Lord to help you to identify and lay aside all excuses and pray that He will speak to you daily through His Word. Your abundant life depends on it!

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