

Shepherding the Flock, Part 1

1 Peter 5:1-2

60-46

First Peter chapter 5 verses 1 through 4. Let me read this text to you. "Therefore I exhort the elders among you as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion but voluntarily according to the will of God and not for sordid gain but with eagerness, nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."

The main intent of this marvelous section of Scripture is wrapped up in the first word of verse 2, the word "shepherd." That is the main verb. That is the main thrust. That is the main idea. That is the exhortation. Peter says I exhort you to shepherd the flock of God.

Unfortunately as time and history and culture would have it, we know very little about shepherding. We know very little about shepherds. We know very little about sheep. For the most part, we are under some fairly prevalent misconceptions on both counts. Before we can understand what it means to shepherd the flock of God in a spiritual sense, we have to understand the analogy itself from the physical side.

I came to understand a little more about shepherding because of my trip, along with my family, to New Zealand. Prior to that time my knowledge was somewhat limited, though I had a temporary summer job in high school as a shepherd, would you believe, out in the desert. It didn't last too long, long enough for me to have a little knowledge but not enough to be able to communicate significantly. But after my trip to New Zealand and after reading a book written by one of the foremost shepherds in all of New Zealand, which I have read quite carefully, I think I have a little better understanding of what it is to be a shepherd and to have to care for sheep. So before we look at the spiritual side, I need to fill in the gaps of shepherding that would have been well known to Peter's audience.

The sheep, for example, is the only animal in the world that can be totally lost within a few miles of its home. Most animals have been given by God an instinct to find their way back, an uncanny instinct to go home. For the most part, that is an element of animal life. Now within its closed range, the sheep has adequate skills. It knows its own pasture. It knows the place where it was born and suckled by its mother. It will invariably rest in the same shade every day. It will sleep in the same fold in the same place. It will stay in the home range more than any other grazing animal and not go very far.

But if that sheep is taken into unfamiliar territory, it becomes completely lost. It has no sense of direction. It has no sense of orientation. It does not know where it is and it does not know how to get where it's supposed to be. It cannot find its way home. In fact, lost sheep will walk around usually in

endless circles, baaing continually in confusion and unrest and sometimes even panic.

Now sheep are beautiful. Sheep are gentle. Sheep are humble. Sheep are, contrary to popular opinion, quite intelligent. But they are so utterly prone to get lost that if they go astray they are helpless to find food or to find water. There are about a billion plus sheep in the world and all of them would very soon starve to death or die of thirst if it were not for thousands of caring shepherds, who like the shepherd in Scripture goes, out after the lost sheep because he knows it could never find its way back. All other animals can track back, not the sheep.

When Jesus saw the disoriented, confused, hungry, thirsty, spiritually lost crowds, He said they were like sheep without a shepherd. They didn't know where they were. They couldn't feed themselves. They couldn't find water. They were totally lost and didn't know the way back and there was no one to lead them to water, to lead them to food, and to lead them home. When the prophet Isaiah wanted to describe lost men, he selected sheep and he said, "All we like sheep have" what? "gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way." And now we're all disoriented and we're all lost and we could never find our way to the sheepfold. And we have no shepherd to lead us.

Sheep, by the way, are especially vulnerable when purposely led astray. They are innate followers, very easy to lead them astray. They told us that in New Zealand about 40 million sheep are sent to market and led to slaughter each year. And there is one sheep that leads them to their death. Strangely enough and not so strangely, that sheep in New Zealand is called the "Judas" sheep. That is a specially selected castrated male sheep who leads the unwitting sheep to the killing floor. Unaware of what is about to happen, the sheep blindly fall in behind the Judas sheep and they follow him to the killing floor at which point a trap door on the side opens and he exits down to bring the next group. The door closes and they are slaughtered. Sheep when astray are utterly lost and unable to find their way back. And sheep can be so easily led to their death.

Another thing that points us to the need for a shepherd; they not only need to be rescued, but they need to be protected. They need to be guided. They need to be provided for. They need a shepherd who can gather them to a safe place, who can bring them home, who goes after them when they stray, who even carries them when they are hurt. Sheep spend most of their life eating and drinking and they are constantly thirsty and constantly hungry. And especially if left without a shepherd they are vulnerable. Here's why. They have to have clean water. They have to have pure water. They have to have water that is not stagnant and filled with potential disease. They have to have water that is not too cold or not too hot. They have to have water that is not moving too rapidly. They need to be led, as the psalmist said, beside the still waters, not stagnant but moving so slowly. The water must be very close by so it can be easily found and made easy to drink.

Most animals are able to smell water at a distance. They can smell it on the wind. They can feel the moisture of it, but not sheep. If sheep are allowed to wander too far from their own pasture, they can sense no water hole, though it be nearby. And they will die of thirst because they have no capacity to find water.

Do you get the feeling God invented sheep just to make a spiritual point? Once they have left their own grazing range, even having devoured that range, they're unable to move to any new place on their own. If they eat their own range, they will continue to eat the stubble and they will continue to eat the dirt before they will venture to move somewhere else unless led there. Furthermore, sheep are not discriminate eaters. Some animals are. Many animals are. Sheep are not. They don't know

the difference between a poisonous plant and a good one. They cannot distinguish between oats, hay, alfalfa, and deadly weeds. And so you can see they have great need for shepherding, a shepherd who is careful, thoughtful, watchful, knowledgeable, wise, a shepherd who plans, provides, pastures, protects his sheep. Sheep left alone will die and the shepherd is the key to their life.

Another element, we imagine sheep to be these little, clean, soft, white, wooly things, like a lamb. When we were in New Zealand we were out on the sheep farm and all of our kids got these little, wooly lambs and a little bottle and they were all feeding these little, wooly lambs and oohing and aahing and cooing about how soft and cuddly the little lambs were. It doesn't take long though for a lamb to become a sheep, and sheep, by the way, are rarely white and almost never clean. They are stained. And the reason they are stained is because within the wool that they produce is an immense amount of oil, lanolin. That oil permeates their hide. They are the greasiest animal you ever put your hand on. They're like somebody who went crazy with hair cream. And because they are so totally greasy and oily, everything in their environment sticks to them, everything; dirt, blowing in the wind or dirt on which they happen to roll, weeds through which they walk, vegetation, seeds being blown about by the wind, anything and everything. And they have absolutely no capacity to clean themselves. They can't do that. They have no physical dexterity to do that. They are dirty until the shepherd shears them.

Furthermore, sheep have to be in a place where the food is good but they can't be in a place where the ground is wet. If the ground is at all wet, they get foot rot. So it has to be fertile ground and productive ground but not moist ground. Furthermore, if they are in feeding on moist wet grass, they get severe diarrhea and because of the wool and the grease all over them that coagulates on their body, stops the normal elimination process, and kills the sheep because of the accumulation of that.

You might be interested to know, and then again you might not, I'll leave it to you, that flies kill sheep by laying eggs in them. Sheep can't defend themselves. And when those maggots become flies and hatch, a sheep can be driven literally to death. Periodically the shepherd, and we were in the little barn with the shepherd way in the Outback in Australia and the shepherd brought all the sheep in and he took out his shears and he grabbed the sheep and flipped it over and the rear part of the sheep he just sheared a huge area out so that the droppings didn't literally kill the sheep. Later on in the year he would cut the rest of their wool. He alone could clean them. They can't clean each other. They can't clean themselves.

Not only that, no animal in the world is as defenseless as a sheep. Do you know they have absolutely no defense? They can't kick. They can't scratch. They can't bite. They can't jump. And they can't run. They just stand there and die. They have absolutely no defense mechanism. They're dead meat, or dead wool, if you will. And when they are attacked by a predator, do you know what sheep do? Instead of running away, they run together. They huddle, which makes it easy. The predator gets whichever one he wants. You see, without the shepherd they can't survive, they could never survive. Sheep are more vulnerable to injury than any other animal because they are so humble in spirit, their...their attitude is such a meek attitude that they give up. If you hurt a sheep, he is so easily, or she is so easily broken in spirit, says the shepherd, that they will be completely crushed by the pain and the hurt and they lack a self-preservation instinct. They have no will to fight and they have no struggle to live. So they just give up and die.

They say that a full-wooled sheep, if it falls on its back, is very often not able to roll back up on its feet. It just gives up and dies unless a shepherd comes to pick it up, to turn it over. And when a

sheep has been lying on its back and unable to roll back up for a long period of time, when the shepherd comes and picks it up, he has to treat it with care because its circulation has stopped. And if he tries to set it back on its feet it will just fall over again. And he may have to carry it, the shepherds say, for an hour before the circulation will allow him to put it down.

Sheep need constant attention. They...they get lost. They can't find water. They can't find food. They eat the wrong things. They roll over and die. They get hurt and give up. They can't run, kick, bite, scratch or jump. They're the most vulnerable creature there are and yet isn't it amazing, of all of the animals that the world offers they are the most useful. You can use every single part of the sheep. I won't go into all of the things that they're used for, but every part of the sheep is useful.

Now, all that wonderful imagery of the sheep and the shepherd has been lost to us, but it needs to be recaptured if we're to understand the richness of our text. Can I read these verses to you again? Just the first two, "Therefore I exhort the elders among you as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you." Now does that have new meaning to you? It should. It should have a lot of new meaning. Now all of a sudden you understand that Peter has chosen an analogy which says you have a helpless people who are highly vulnerable, defenseless, tend to wander away, don't know what's good for them, and they desperately need your shepherding. By the way, shepherding is a full-time responsibility because sheep have so many potential problems.

So Peter turns in this text to the shepherds and their great responsibility to the sheep. The sheep are in need and the demand for faithful shepherds is compelling.

Now where are we in this epistle? Well, Peter's been writing to a persecuted church and it's obvious, it should be obvious to you from what I just said that when the sheep are under attack they are even more vulnerable, right? And so Peter comes to the point in chapter 5 after some great teaching in chapter 4 about how to live under persecution, he comes to this issue in which he says, "Look, a persecuted church is even more desperately in need of quality shepherds because the risk factors are so great." When the church is experiencing persecution, it has the greatest need for strong, godly effective shepherds. The toughest times demand the best shepherds. So Peter moves wonderfully from the difficulty the believers are experiencing to reveal God's will for the men who must shepherd the troubled sheep. And that's why chapter 5 begins with what word? "Therefore, therefore because we are under persecution, because we are suffering for righteousness sake, therefore I'm exhorting you shepherds; Take care of those persecuted, troubled sheep."

Now who are these elders to whom he speaks and writes? Back in chapter 1 verse 1, "Peter an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia," and he identifies believers in all of those regions. And so he's talking to the elders of the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. But he's talking also to all the elders of the church of all the ages. He's talking to us.

And here you have a command from Peter to the elders of the church, to the pastors of the church, to the shepherds. Now in order to sort of get the code to unlock these treasures in these four verses, you need only ask four questions. Simply four basic questions and those four questions will push the right buttons to make this passage clear. The questions are: What, who, how and why. And if you understand the answer to those questions, you have unlocked the treasures of this great passage.

The first question is what. What is the issue here? What does Peter want to say? What is he asking? What is he exhorting? What does he desire? What does the Spirit of God call for? Here it is. It is summed up in these simple words, "I exhort the elders, shepherd the flock of God." That's the heart of it. That's what he wants. It's a very narrow and very specific section of Scripture. He's talking to elders and he's talking about them shepherding the flock of God.

The term "exhort" indicates an urging, an appeal. It is a term that you're probably somewhat familiar with, *parakaleō*. The Holy Spirit is called the *paraklete*. It means to come along side and call, it means to call alongside and encourage someone in a certain direction, to urge them, to appeal to them. And that's exactly what he's doing. He says, "I exhort the elders." Who are they? The spiritual overseers, the spiritual teachers and leaders, the pastors of the church. There are three terms in the New Testament you need to keep in mind: Elder, bishop, pastor. Those three terms are used interchangeably. Elder, bishop, or sometimes it's translated overseer, and pastor, all refer to the same person. They're used interchangeably in Acts chapter 20 and other places in the New Testament. This particular term, "elder," emphasizes their maturity and is an official title of the office. The term "overseer" emphasizes their function of leadership. And the term "pastor" emphasizes their function of teaching and feeding. So they are mature men who have an office in which they lead and feed.

Every elder is an overseer. Every elder overseer is a pastor. They have followed the Old Testament pattern in Israel where each of the synagogues had ruling elders, mature godly men who had oversight and who were responsible in the main for teaching the truth of God. And so the early church followed a somewhat similar pattern, although more refined, of godly men, a plurality of them over each local congregation, responsible to lead and feed. And those elders were the leaders or bishops overseers and the feeders, or pastors. That was their responsibility, to teach, to lead, to guard the purity of the truth against error and the purity of the church against sin, to bring unity to the church, to be the spiritual examples, to handle the issues of the church. They were the shepherds. It was their responsibility to do everything the sheep needed done. It was their responsibility to keep the sheep from going astray. It was their responsibility to keep the sheep from getting lost on their own, wandering off into some pasture that would be harmful to them or getting separated from the fellowship. It was their responsibility to make sure there wasn't a Judas sheep coming around, someone masquerading as a true teacher to lead them astray. It was their responsibility to make sure they were led by still waters and in green pastures. It was their responsibility to make sure that if they were wounded they encouraged them by lifting them and soothing them and anointing their head with oil and caring for them. It was their responsibility if they had rolled over on their back and were in fear of death that they were to pick them up and carry them for as long as they needed to be carried. It was their responsibility to make sure when they were under attack that they were defended properly. All of this was and is the responsibility of the elders.

So Peter writes to them and to me and to all elders and pastors. Shepherd, he says. I love that, verse 2, shepherd, shepherd. This verb includes all that is inherent in the shepherding task. It's so magnificent, so beautiful, this shepherding task.

I found a little book that might even open this further to you. Just sit back and listen, let me read you some excerpts from it. It's about a shepherd and it should give you the spiritual picture you need.

"With a spring in his step and an eye to the sky at sunrise, he makes straight for the sheepfold. As

soon as he rattles the gate, gives his morning call, greets the sheep often by name, every sheep is on its feet. They spring toward the gate with expectancy written on their faces and in their eyes, another great day on the range with their loving shepherd, leading the way to fresh grass and cool water. How they eagerly bound through the gate one after another, the younger lambs and yearlings with a skip and a bound of sheer joy, pleasure and playfulness! The older sheep in a more sedate and dignified manner as if reserving their energy for the demands of the long day ahead. The sun peeps over the hilltop horizon to make jewels of the dew on the bushes, the ground, grass, and tussocks. The air is clear and brisk and bright and the wind has not yet arrived and there's a sense of peace all around. As the flock strings out, all is joy, abounding life, and togetherness. The sheep follow after as the shepherd leads them along a different course, in a new direction, to feed on a fresh range that hasn't been grazed for a while. The leaders are at first unsettled and seem to want to return to the old paths and the well-worn ways but they reluctantly follow the lead of their shepherd as he directs them to fresh, clean pastures and sweet new grazing.

"As they enter this new range, all is action. The flock comes alive, each of the sheep tries to out step the others in a search of the first morsel of sweet wildflower, a ripe seed head, a rich bottom clover or a ground-hugging plant. Each tender morsel is nipped off on the move, a bite at every stride. What a joy to observe a flock of hungry sheep graze the fresh, sweet pasture.

"It doesn't last long. The first pangs of hunger are soon satisfied and the mob aligns itself behind the active leaders. The lambs are ready for their morning treat, mother's milk. This wonderful mother gives all to her twin lambs as they grow bigger and fatter while she becomes thinner, and until they almost lift her off the ground as they bunt and bump to bring down the sweet milk. No wonder she often lags a bit and appears exhausted, having to meet the insatiable demands of these ravenous young ones that never seem to get enough.

"The leaders are either alone or have only one lamb to tend to. Often they are barren ewes, wethers, or rams with nothing to hold them back. They're often more selfish than the other sheep who are making many sacrifices. They hurry on, run ahead, push and jockey for position, demanding the first and best morsel for themselves. It is that way with the older ones.

"A shepherd is well aware of their behavior. He knows all about it. Many times he will deliberately let them charge ahead and up a barren rock plateau while he turns the tail of the mob and the stragglers into a path leading to the sweet side valley and into the rich pasture. Gradually he goes back to the greedy sheep and the leaders who are stringing out the flock and taking them in the wrong direction. The shepherd takes his time to turn them all around, bring them back to join the others, being sure they have had ample time to nourish themselves on the first fruits.

"As the day grows hotter and the sun climbs to its zenith in the clear bright sky, the sheep start to search for shade, the shade of any tree or bush or overhanging rock. And each sheep is showing signs of thirst with the drooping ear and the licking of lips. The shepherd knows the range and he's walked the sheep paths long before any of his flock have ever been born. He knows where the green pastures are and he knows where the fresh springs of water are. He knows the way is not always easy. Sometimes the sheep must be forced and persuaded to move down a steep rocky path. It is often difficult going. They would much rather climb than descend. It is their natural inclination. The rocky path is narrow and the rocky path is perilous and the rocky path hurts their tender feet and there is unnecessary crowding and there is dust and there is heat. And finally they come to the low plateau in the lower ground and at last around the bottom bluff the spring gently gurgles, making a

still pond of crystal clear water.

"The leaders call to the others, signaling the discovery of the water and within a few minutes all is contentment. Thirst is replaced with refreshment. What a sight. Each sheep takes its turn, each sheep sips rather than gulps. There's no charging in, no shoving, no forcing. They wait politely one for another. They often take time to wet their silky muzzles, swish and toss their heads drinking slowly with no haste and great contentment.

"Then it's sleep time; the sheep, in the cool shade of boulders and bushes and trees and the shepherd in the shade of a high point where he can survey all the flock as they settle down for a two to three hour nap. At last all the lambs are quieted. A time for rest, a time for meditation, no chewing the cud, no noise, no predators, no peril, no dangers; at last near the soil, the grass, the water, the best part of the day, what a sanctuary for sheep and shepherd under his watchful eye.

"It is midafternoon and the first to move is the shepherd. The shadows are beginning to grow longer. The heat of the day is passed. It's time to retrace steps back to home and to the sheepfold. The flock is slow to stir from its sleep. The sheep would remain where they were all day and into the twilight if the shepherd would let them. But it's time to depart and begin the journey homeward. The leaders of the flock are started back first along the path that leads homeward and up the steep path. The rest slowly follow. On regaining the tops the afternoon winds begin to stir. The stir becomes a strong wind and a gale directly in the face of the flock and the dust is flying and the hot air whistling straight into their faces. How the flock dislike wind in their face. Always on the range they immediately turn their backs to the wind, but now they must take the wind head on. Why? Why doesn't the shepherd let us go before it? Turn our back to it or lead us in another way? The answer is although it is difficult, although it is hard, it is the way home to the sheepfold. And if they linger and if they dawdle, if they are not there by sunset, the flock will become scattered, the sheep will lose their way, they will become prey for predators, thieves and robbers who prefer the darkness to the light. It's not an easy end to the day. Many problems have been faced, many dangers anticipated, many needs met, and the shepherd has had to be vigilant all day long.

"When the way is hard the flock may often become quite unsettled, even when it's on its way home. The shepherd observes a poor old ewe limping along at the tail of the mob. He goes to her and finds a small hard, stick between her hooves. He takes the ewe in his arms and holds her gently and reassuredly and carefully removes the offending hurt. He rubs in some soothing salve, lifts her to her feet and moves her into the homeward path.

"A count of the flock reveals that one sheep is missing. He looks far and wide and then retraces the path of the sheep, looking for the one that is lost. He searches high and low and there in the thicket of a thorn bush, caught and unable to escape, is the lost sheep. Gently he works the sheep loose, carries it over his shoulder the half mile to rejoin the procession home. And when he catches up with the flock and returns the lost sheep, the shepherd spots two big rams fighting it out for leadership and dominance within the flock. Hurriedly the shepherd parts them and teaches them who's really the boss, the shepherd. While the shepherd was gone, a ewe had become cast in a hole and her lamb separated off on the other side of the mob and both are in great distress and the shepherd goes into action. He lifts the ewe back on to her feet, reassuring her, walking her through the mob while she calls for her little lamb and finally they're soon reunited.

"The sun is setting amidst the colorful clouds in the western sky. It's red sky at night, shepherd's

delight, there's promise of a wonderful day tomorrow. The last mile, the easy mile, is a well-worn path back to the sheepfold. It has been traveled many times and on many days. The sheep sense familiar territory, their home field, their home fold. The shepherd precedes them. He stands at the sheepfold with the gate wide open. He calls them in, "Come unto me and you shall find rest." The mob — with little prompting — streams through the portal to rest, to protection, to contentment, to safety. Here in the sheepfold no more dangers, no more perils, no more rocky paths, no predators, no blazing sun, no dry grass, no dust, no wind, no thorns, no crying, no pain. Rather there is a sweet straw, pure water, high walls around the sanctuary, protection against all dangers, sweet peace, sweet rest, sweet fellowship, until the shepherd comes to awaken them again to a bright new morning. The shepherd knows his flock. All are in. He shuts the door. Only he has the power to open it again."

It's a beautiful scene, isn't it? That's the shepherd. Who is the Chief Shepherd? Christ, who leads us out and will someday lead us home. And we who are His under shepherds, we must shepherd the flock of God.

Well, that's the analogy. Next Sunday night we'll see the spiritual significance. Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, we thank You for the simple beauty of the words, "I exhort the elders, shepherd the flock of God." And now we feel like we can touch that a little bit and capture its meaning a little better. Now we understand what elders and pastors are to do to lead the sheep out, no matter how difficult the way, to find the green pastures and the sweet water, to save them from the predators, to find them when they're lost, to keep them close to the rest, to put salve on their wounds, to make sure the families are brought together, to lead them through the trials of the hard wind in the face, and then even to lead them the last mile into the presence of the Savior. Lord, we want to be faithful shepherds, to take care of the little lambs, take care of the yearlings, the hoggets, take care of the sheep, take care of the older sheep. Father, make us faithful so that someday the Chief Shepherd will commend our work and we will thank Him for the privilege. What a joy, O God, to serve the holy Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, we rejoice in that privilege. In His dear name. Amen.

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