

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Belonging to Jesus: My Sheep – John 10:11, 27-29

Recently, whilst on holiday with my wife, we visited a market town in Cumbria that had a couple of second hand bookshops which we browsed, hoping that the very wet weather would change for the better. As it did not, we moved on to a nearby wool centre, where woollen goods of all kinds were on sale. Entry to the warehouse was free, but on offer was a ticket to a sheep show and, having no knowledge whatsoever of sheep, we paid our money to watch the proceedings. Some friends, who had visited the show previously, told us that the sheep had been taught to read English as they all went to the stall bearing the name of their breed. Obviously, I was not so gullible as to believe them, for it was apparent that the sheep had been trained to go to the place on the show stand that bore their name. All the same, it did indicate to me how little I knew about the many breeds and their different qualities.

Living in urban England, where sheep in the wild are rather scarce, could cause us to miss some of the tender implications of the words of the Lord Jesus, when He referred to His followers as sheep. Today's talk is the first in a series of four, with the overall title of Belonging to Jesus and, as you will have gathered, we shall concentrate this morning on being the sheep of Jesus. I say again, that, due to our urban environment and distance in time, most of us will have difficulty in grasping the constant care that was needed from the shepherd in biblical times.

I want now to read John 10:10-14: "The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine".

From this rather long quotation we can notice a number of things, but the one I want to emphasise is that the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. In our democratic age we find it difficult to comprehend that a job could include any risk to our lives. It is obvious, from John 10, that a shepherd in Biblical times would face attacks from wild animals. Some of the paid shepherds would take the easy path, preferring to let the flock be scattered and, perhaps, destroyed rather than face the dangers of the hunting animals.

I am sure that you can remember the story of David and Goliath which is recorded in 1 Samuel 17. There, David enlarges before King Saul why he is suited to go and challenge the giant from Gath. One of the reasons he gives is that he fought against a lion and a bear, when they came to attack the flock, and this when he was nothing more than a teenager. No wonder then that, when David muses upon God's care for him, he uses the figure of a shepherd that is so potently described in Psalm 23.

In the final analysis it does not matter whether we understand, or appreciate, the background to the statements in John's Gospel that we quoted earlier. What we have to perceive is that the Lord is stating, and stating quite plainly, that He will give His life for the sheep. The expression, "lay down his life", is only found in John's Gospel and has in view a death that is both voluntary and sacrificial. Evangelical teaching places the death of Christ at the centre of the atonement. We put it there, being convinced that that is where the whole of the New Testament places it. The Lord's death, at Calvary, is the complete and only meaning of the phrase that involves the shepherd laying down His life for the sheep. I repeat that the death of Jesus is a crucial necessity, for without it there can be no salvation.

It might be asked that if, as Christ died a fully atoning death, it makes any difference to me, as one of the sheep for whom He laid down His life. As an answer I quote 1 John 3:16: "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren".

In this verse, the response is clearly seen to demand action. If I truly believe that Jesus died for me, then I will consider it to be the greatest demonstration of the love of God that there ever could be. This will cause me to love and act in a sacrificial way. This, then, is my first point in this morning's theme of belonging to Jesus: we are His because He died for us, as an eighteenth century hymn-writer stated:

*We'll sing of the Shepherd that died,
That died for the sake of the flock;
His love to the utmost was tried,
But firmly endured as a rock.*

The Apostle Paul wrote, in 1 Corinthians, that we are bought with a price. (1 Corinthians 6:19) This further helps us to grasp that for us to belong to the Lord Jesus, and to be one of the sheep of His pasture, was very costly for Him, as the Shepherd. A Victorian poetess wrote of this transaction in a hymn that has become quite well known, so I quote again.

*He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by His precious blood.*

Mrs Alexander might have written it for children, yet it sums up the essential effect of the death of the Lord Jesus.

I wish now to read John 10:26-27: "But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me".

Before I discuss the sheep hearing the shepherd's voice, I want us to notice that unbelief is a mark that we are not of the Lord's flock. The point in question is whether, or not, Jesus is the Christ. We have to be brought to the point where we make the confession that the Apostle Peter made, as recorded in Matthew 16:16: "And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Faith in Christ is an essential requisite for being one of the Lord's sheep.

My second point is that, according to verse 27 that we read a moment or two ago, the sheep hear and respond to the voice of the shepherd. From literature about the history and customs of Bible times, we learn that the sheep would literally recognise the voice of their own shepherd, to the point where a call could bring them together from a mixed flock. We could apply the recognition of the Shepherd's voice to the call that brings us into the Christian church when we first believed. That is not to say that we all know the day when we became Christians, because some of us can't put an exact date to that experience. The New Testament, however, often uses the thought of being called to describe the time when a person became a Christian. Paul, in 2 Timothy 1, talks of God's call, as he does again in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans. Many other instances could be given, but these are sufficient to make the point, that if we are believers in Jesus, we have heard His voice calling to us in grace.

I wish to take this point a little further, beyond the initial conversion encounter with God, and suggest that listening to His voice can be a regular event in our spiritual lives. One of the clearest ways of listening to Him is to read His word. A Christian who ignores the Bible is removing one of the most important ways of listening to the Shepherd's voice. We, at Truth for Today, believe that the Bible is the Word of God and, therefore, equips us with the truth for daily living. In it we can hear the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking to His flock in today's world. I am also convinced that we, as the sheep of the Lord Jesus, will hear His voice calling us together. This is a pertinent point that comes to us with freshness every Lord's Day. Will we respond this day to His call for His flock to gather together to worship and praise Him? This is a regular and never failing call that comes to all of us who have been brought to love Him. Do we respond to His call and meet at least once a week with other Christians?

Another aspect of listening to His voice must include the ministry of His word by gifted Bible teachers. There are those servants of the Lord who pastor and minister to His flock. They, as led of the Spirit, are dedicated to attending to the needs of the Christians in a particular locality and, by a regular preaching and teaching ministry, seek to instruct them in the things of Christ. In such a way the Christian is taught how to behave as a follower of the Lord. Thus, when we gather together on a Sunday, it should be possible to hear His voice in the faithful exposition of a passage of Scripture. Perhaps you know the hymn that describes this:

*"Speak, Lord, in the stillness,
While I wait on Thee;
Hushed my heart to listen
In expectancy.*

*For the words Thou speakest,
They are life indeed;
Living Bread from heaven,
Now my spirit feed!*

*Fill me with the knowledge
Of Thy glorious will;
All Thine own good pleasure
In Thy child fulfil."*

The pertinent question is whether we listen to His voice, or recognise it as we read His word.

The third point I want to make this morning also comes out of verse John 10:27, and, though I have already quoted it once, I shall read it again, though this time from the New International Version: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." It is the last three words of this verse, where it is said that the sheep will follow the shepherd, that I want to concentrate upon for the next few minutes.

Following Jesus is not an optional extra for the Christian. If we have heard His voice, and become believers in Him, it should affect us in every way. If we compare the shepherd in the era when the New Testament was written, with the shepherd today, there is one obvious difference. A modern shepherd would not talk of leading his flock; rather would he drive them from the rear, with the aid of his dog, whereas a shepherd in Palestine would lead his sheep from the front, and they would follow along behind. It is important for us to grasp this and realise that the Lord is leading us, His sheep, in love. He is aware of every nuance of our lives. This might seem simplistic, yet I am convinced that this is what the Bible teaches.

Many of us are apt to think, even if we do not say it aloud, that God is unaware of the details of our pathway. Perhaps it is the death of a loved one, or a long period of ill health, or unemployment, that makes us tempted to say that we are being treated unjustly. The people of God, in Isaiah's time, did just that, as it is recorded in Isaiah 40:27: "Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God?"

The answer for them is given in verse 28; "Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? There is no searching of his understanding."

In addition to the encouragement in this verse which informs us that God is not unaware of our circumstances, however dark they might seem, we, as believers in Jesus, have the additional inspiration of the incarnation. Surely, the knowledge that, in some inexplicable way, the eternal God was here in this world, in the Person of Jesus, must provide us with the certainty that He understands every circumstance that we move through.

There is nothing that we have to endure that the Lord has not gone through, sin apart. We are assured of His presence every moment of our life, if we are following Him. In Psalm 23, David wrote of his experiences as being led of the Lord. As his sweet words have been an inspiration to countless millions over the years, I can do no better than repeat a few lines of his poem to emphasise the wonder of being a sheep in the Lord's flock: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, 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 they comfort me."

There is more, but such words give us the flavour of the privilege and blessing of being in the flock of God. We must, also, remember that this is the reality and not pie in the sky. I ask myself, as I ask you: is it real for us?

After the favour of being led by the Lord, we must now consider the responsibility that such favour incurs. To follow the Lord Jesus must involve being obedient to His commands. In Matthew 11:29, He tells us to take His yoke and learn of Him. Those who claim to believe in Jesus, yet live a life of uncaring selfishness, can hardly wonder if people give them the label of hypocrisy. Paul and the other apostles have laid out, in their letters to the young churches, the implications of being a Christian. A passage of scripture, such as Romans 12, shows us of the type of behaviour that faith in Christ should demand from us. For the sake of brevity we will read verses 12 and 13: "Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality."

In just two verses, we are given five demands that faith in Christ makes upon us. If we follow the Lord as our Shepherd, we have to walk in His footsteps.

Perhaps this point is best summed up by some words that the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:1: "Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more."

We can't gainsay such a verse with any excuse whatsoever. He will lead us along a path that is pleasing to Him. Such a path might not always be easily apparent, as Job 28:7-8 proclaim: "There is a path which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture's eye hath not seen: the lion's whelps have not trodden it, nor the fierce lion passed by it".

When we obey His call, and walk in faithfulness to Him, we shall always be assured of His presence with us constantly. A desire to be a follower of Jesus, in our age, should result in a Christian character. We should have love, patience, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness and faith, all displayed in a world that is given over to materialism. We need to examine ourselves to see if we maintain these features that marked the Lord, as He lived in the same world.

The last point I wish to make this morning is found in John 10:27-29: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life: and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.”

This last point has to do with the security of the believer, which does not depend upon him, or her, but rather upon the Shepherd. Again, if we refer back to the illustration of the sheep being looked after in the land of Palestine, it is only the shepherd who is responsible for the safety of the sheep. They, the sheep, are unable, in themselves, to resist the dangers of the wilderness. In like manner our present, and ultimate salvation, is in Christ.

Notice first, the kind, or quality, of life that the Shepherd gives to His sheep. Eternal life is the gift that we have through the grace of God. This is not earned, or deserved, by us, but is rather the unqualified free gift of eternal love. This does not mean life after death, though that is included. In John 17:3 there is a reference to eternal life: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”

Those who have been called into the fellowship of Christ have the knowledge of God here and now. To me, this is one of the great mysteries of Christianity, that we, at this present time, have the knowledge of God. We might not have any true estimation of the vastness of God, yet in Christ we are granted an insight, whilst in time. So secure is this, that no one can take it away from us. Jesus, in the verses we have quoted, talks about the security of the sheep. We are in His Hands, and, we who know the Saviour, can appreciate the safety that is offered. Whether in time, or eternity, we are safe, because the Shepherd is in control of the destiny of the flock. If only we had the faith always to accept the Lord’s statements at face value, we would save ourselves an immense amount of sorrow. If He has said we are the sheep of His pasture, and that we can go in and out in perfect freedom, then we should enjoy the blessings, whilst not forgetting the responsibilities that being one of His sheep brings.

I finish this morning by reiterating the important facts that we have considered. We are His sheep, because we have heard His voice, and continue to listen to Him. As we listen, we follow where He leads, conscious of the safety, and security, that being a sheep in His flock gives to us. This is perfectly summed up in the closing verses of Psalm 23.

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.”

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