

## **A Sunday Morning Exhortation (32)**

It is very appropriate that on the first day of another week we should be met together reading of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. He rose from the dead on the first day of the week, and so the disciples assembled on that day for remembrance in connection with their worship and praise. He gave them a command, to meet and partake of the memorials in loving memory of his suffering and of his death. "For as often as ye do this ye do show the Lord's death until he come." And whilst the symbols before us upon the table teach us of the great sacrifice of our elder brother, with the sleep of death in the tomb, they take our minds beyond the tomb to a resurrected Saviour. They even take us into the Kingdom of God, as Jesus declared at the institution of this feast, "I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine until I drink it new with you in my Father's Kingdom."

So we are here this morning to remember a risen and glorified Saviour, and through the gospel record by John we have some wonderful memories of those thrilling experiences that he had with Jesus during his short ministry of three and a half years. We read how on one occasion he was demonstrating that he was the light of the world, and on another occasion that he was the bread of life sent down from heaven, and on another occasion he demonstrated that he was the Good Shepherd. Then we recall him at the grave of Lazarus, when he also demonstrated the fact that he was the Resurrection and the Life, and so we could go on recalling those happy memories we have of Jesus from the record of John.

But how sad as we get to the end — Calvary, the suffering and the cross, that ignominious death — yes, we felt very sad as we read those thrilling experiences of our Master. We were not, however, exactly in the position of those immediate disciples; they did not understand when Jesus had previously told them that he should suffer and then rise again; hence, when some of them saw him upon the cross their hopes were forlorn. So this morning, leaving those sad reflections of Calvary, we can all rejoice together; Jesus has been raised from the dead, and so, as we sing, "Sing praise, the tomb is void, where the Redeemer lay." So by the aid of John's record we have the privilege and the great blessing of being with Jesus again for a few short days prior to his ascension to heaven. He is with his disciples again, and we note that there are no words of bitterness at all coming from his lips, but rather words of love. No stern reproof because of their apparent lack of faith, but rather words of encouragement; and even Peter, who so tenaciously denied his Lord, had the special privilege of happy recognition after the resurrection. Jesus used no words that would make keener any remorse that Peter might have, but rather words that would help him to forget the past and prepare him for the work of the immediate future.

Now we commence at verse 15 of the 21st chapter, and there we note the fact that Jesus had dined with his disciples. After dinner he calls Peter, and especially conversed with him. We note he calls him by his original name. Simon (not Peter, Cephas, a stone, a rock), but Simon. Why is this? It may be possibly to remind him of his position before he was called to become a fisher of men. It may be to remind him also of that occasion when Jesus said to him—"Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you, that your faith fail not." This produced from Peter those words we well know, "Lord, I am ready to go with thee to prison and to death." We know what Jesus told Peter, what would happen even before the time of the cock-crowing that very day. We remember how Peter denied his Lord, and we recall that glance of Jesus toward him, and then it is recorded that Peter remembered the words of Jesus, and he went out and wept bitterly. We believe this crisis in the life of Peter was the great turning-point, when impetuous Peter became the great apostle of his Lord.

Just a word here: the call of Christ demands sincere love and affection. What did Jesus mean, "Lovest thou me more than these?" There were other disciples there; did he mean, "Peter, do you love me more than these disciples love me?" "Do you love me more than these disciples you love?" Or did he mean: "Peter, lovest thou me more than the boats and the fishes and the nets?" Listen to Jesus saying to each one of us, "Lovest thou me more than these?" Then we ask ourselves, is our love

stronger for our friends, our relatives and neighbours, than it is for Christ our Saviour who has done so much for us? Let us examine ourselves as we listen to the question of Jesus, "Lovest thou me more than these?"

We listen again, "Lovest thou me more than these — the fishes and the nets?" Do we love our business, our homes, our pleasures, more than we love Jesus? Let us recall he so loved us that he died for us. Therefore, our love must be shown to him in our lives. We remember he said, "If ye love me keep my commandments." Here is the test whereby we can each one examine ourselves as we ponder the words, "Lovest thou me more than these?" But Peter in all sincerity and in all humility replies, "Lord, thou knowest that I love thee," and Peter would say this with the knowledge of the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ knew the intents of his heart. He knew Peter's sincerity; he knew now here was a token of a repentant spirit. So Jesus said to him—"Feed my lambs." We leave the reflections upon this until we have listened again to Jesus. Possibly there would be silence among them all, and we can quite imagine Peter weighing those three words, "Feed my lambs." In the 16th verse Jesus says to him the second time, "Simon, lovest thou me?" Only three words in Christ's question this time, and they drew from Peter the reply, which was only to repeat what he said before, "Lord, thou knowest that I love thee." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." Possibly after another quiet spell, Jesus for the third time says to Peter, "Simon, lovest thou me?" Now it says Peter was grieved because Jesus asked him the third time—note here that Peter was grieved—not Peter was angry or vexed. The spirit of impetuous Peter had been tamed down—no feeling of pride now; he felt he could tell Jesus from the bottom of his heart that he really loved him. He did not feel now that he could "tell Jesus off," to use one of our Black Country expressions. Peter was now the humble, sincere, repentant Peter, hence it grieved or troubled him, so Peter says to Jesus now, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." Then Jesus again replies, "Feed my sheep," and he proceeds to tell Peter what a change would come over him from his youthful activities, which would bring him to be ultimately dependent upon others to support him physically, and this would come upon him for his great love and fidelity to his Master.

But we will not travel any further this morning, interesting though the record is, but retrace our steps. First, "Feed my lambs," second, "Feed my sheep." "Feed my lambs"—that is the primary duty of a shepherd: to look after the young and the tender lambs. If they cannot get where the sheep have gone, then tenderly the shepherd takes them up in his arms. If they are wounded or cut and distressed at all, especial care is taken of them by the shepherd. How beautifully those words from the pen of the prophet Isaiah through the Spirit come in here, as touching the gathering of Israel to their land, and how pathetic. "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young." I believe the original word for "feed" here denotes not only to give them food, but it means to do all for them that is required of a faithful shepherd. It means to lead them, to protect them, as well as give them food.

These words of Jesus certainly had an effect upon Peter. In his first epistle and the fifth chapter he is exhorting the elders to feed the flock of God over which God had made them overseers. But, as leading up to those words of Peter, we would like to remind ourselves how this word shepherd is used in the Scriptures in one or two instances. It is Peter again who directs us to the word in a very special way in the first epistle, second chapter, 25th verse, "For ye were as sheep going astray, but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls." So the Chief Shepherd here is the Bishop of our lives, and bracketed together referring to our elder Brother. If we take the word bishop, it means overseer, superintendent, or an elder, and so we can understand the words of Peter writing to the elders here, "taking the oversight thereof." As Peter brackets those two together—shepherd and bishop—in reference to the Lord Jesus Christ, we find a phase which is worthy of our consideration. The word Shepherd means Feeder, one who attends to the flock, one who cares for them in all the duties pertaining to that occupation. So it is not without significance that Peter writes to the elders to feed the flock of God over which God had made them overseers. Hence, those shepherds in the East, as a class, had no priority over another. The very poor did this work, and so did the very rich; in fact, it was looked upon as an honourable calling in those times. What a difference to the present-day shepherds, those who are called the shepherds of the flock in the churches and chapels around us;

there is class distinction with them. There are the clergy of the flock and the laity. But in the ecclesias to-day — in the ecclesias — there is no priority at all. If we might so use the term, all are clergy, all are the heritage of God, all are God's lot or portion.

So let us note for a moment or two how this word is used. It was applied to the prophets and the teachers of Old Testament times, but let us take it from the view of God first—commencing at the apex and coming down. David, the shepherd king, introduces the great Creator, our heavenly Father, in this connection in those very lovely words in the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," and he is taking up all the duties of a shepherd here, and David knew what he was talking about; he was a practical shepherd boy, he grew up knowing all about the flock, hence when he writes these words and applies them to his God, how beautiful it is. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." He had faith in his Shepherd. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters." David knew how he had led his flock; when there was no pasture in one place he would lead them to another, to the waters, so that they might be refreshed, and he used all this as applying to the great God — his over-ruling Providence for him. Is it not delightful? Does it not give us the mind of David in all sincerity and in all humility? We could spend the whole time this morning in dealing with this beautiful Psalm.

But we must now take the next in this descending scale, and so we come to the Lord Jesus Christ. He said, "I am the good Shepherd," and Peter says of him, "He is the chief Shepherd and Bishop of our souls." So we recall those beautiful words of the Lord Jesus Christ, and how he contrasts the position of a good shepherd with the hireling and the stranger, and we recall also how he said, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold." Those words are very appropriate for us just now. He was referring to the Gentiles, who, in the providence of God, would come in later on. Here is Peter again, he has the keys, first to the Jew and then to the Gentile, and so now there is but one fold consisting of Jew and Gentile, who are all invited by the Gospel to be united with Christ, who is the Shepherd of the sheep. Jesus knew that the gospel message would reach the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

Now we note this feature of the Good Shepherd which is somewhat different to-day. He was not appointed by his brethren to this position; he was appointed by God his Father to this position, and then what? By the preaching of the Gospel, by his wonderful life and character, he commences to get together a little band of loving disciples. We read first of all of the twelve disciples, and then we read of the seventy, and then we read of others joining this little flock of which Jesus in the days of his flesh was the Good Shepherd. Then we read that when he had called this little flock of believers together after his death and resurrection, as the result of the scattering of the Jews and the dispersing of these apostles and disciples through the Roman Habitable, ecclesias were being formed, and so first of all we find that the apostles were shepherds and bishops because of their work in the ecclesias that were established in the first century. These ecclesias, however, were but one ecclesia in the aggregate, with Jesus as the chief Shepherd; and so in Peter's times, these units that had made up the whole were communities of brethren and sisters banded together with one hope, one faith, one calling, under the loving care and guidance of Jesus, the chief Shepherd, whose duties consisted then of allegiance to him, because he was then the Captain of their salvation; and he is ours too. When, however, these ecclesias were formed, it was necessary to appoint men to serve in those ecclesias, and so next to the apostles we read of the appointment of bishops, and deacons, and elders, and in those times the gifts of the Holy Spirit power of God were distributed among them. According to the several gifts and duties, they were called upon to do, they were endowed with the Holy Spirit. This continued until the apostasy crept in, so much so that the lightstands were removed.

It would appear that some of the duties of the serving brethren, who were elected by their brethren, were duties that called upon them to listen to the words of Jesus to Peter, "Feed my lambs, Feed my sheep," and so these brethren voluntarily did this work in loving service to each other. Paul, writing to Timothy (1st epistle, iii. 1) gives advice to such volunteers: "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." Paul goes on to detail the various mental, moral and spiritual qualifications that must exist in one who was called to be a bishop, and in verses 8 to 13 he deals with

the office of deacons, and he defines their qualifications also; and a word to the sisters here. He also exhorts their sister-wives to be grave, not slanderous, sober, and faithful in all things. So these men in their several capacities were supernaturally endowed men, as Paul says, for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, feeding the lambs, feeding the sheep. But, brethren and sisters, this service and labour of love gave them no priority over their fellow brethren and sisters, such as we note in the churches around us, and Peter warns the believers, he says there must be no lording over God's heritage — we are all one in Christ Jesus.

So we come down to our own times, to the times of the twentieth century ecclesias, when it is necessary in the carrying on of the work in the respective ecclesias for the brethren and sisters to appoint brethren to serve, not to be lords over God's heritage, but to serve; so a word to those who serve, those who are called upon to exhort, to lecture. We must all strive to follow the beloved apostle Paul. Listen to what he says in the first epistle to the Corinthians chap i., "We preach Christ crucified; not with enticing words of man's wisdom, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect." Think much over these words. Paul hid his eloquence behind the cross; the cross was prominent, Jesus Christ and him crucified. The teaching of the cross must be foremost in our exhortations and in our lectures, in all our deportment of life the plain simple teaching of the gospel of salvation. This, when done in exhortation, is feeding the lambs and is feeding the sheep, and we are all lambs, and we are all sheep. We can all keep this lamblike disposition, even when we are growing older.

Now we need not study the finer points of elocution to be a preacher of the cross of Christ, but it does not mean that we should be flippant, jocular, and amuse each other in exhortation. It simply means this, that we must be just ourselves—just ourselves. What the exhorting brother is in the home and in the office, and in the workshop, he should be on the platform, and always putting the cross of Christ first, hiding himself behind. This is searching for each one of us. We realise what depends upon us in example as well as in precept. We hear some to-day talking like this—"Do as I say, but not of necessity what I do." That cannot be so in the ecclesia. We must be practical. The Truth demands that we should strive to exhort our brethren to do what we do, as well as what we say. That is the real way of becoming examples to the flock, and in connection with part of this work of feeding and tending, we feel perhaps that Paul's words to Timothy will be very helpful. In the 2nd epistle chap. ii. 2, he writes: "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." Again, in the 1st epistle, chap. iv. 6, "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained." This introduces the idea that the work of ministering or shepherding is a relay experience, and it is—we are taught—we must teach, and all done in faithfulness, using our talents, great or small, in loving service to each other.

So these words of the Master to Peter, "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep," come as a loving exhortation to all who serve in these closing days of the Gentiles. Also the words of Peter to the elders of his time equally come as a loving exhortation to those who strive to serve God and Jesus Christ faithfully. True, we have not the Spirit measured out in these times as they did in Peter's, but, failing eldership endowed with the Holy Spirit, we have the next best thing, for we have the Spirit-word. This should guide us, and this is where all those duties calling for feeding the lambs and the sheep come in, and that is where we feel our position very keenly. All brethren who serve must feel it in these closing days of the Gentiles. Whilst we have not the Holy Spirit as had these elders and bishops and deacons of those days, yet the same moral and spiritual qualifications must exist to-day as they did then. We read them carefully, and we ponder over them. Every brother who serves will seek to feed the lambs and the sheep. He will be most careful that he is giving to them the manna, and that takes us to the wilderness. Our's is a wilderness career just now, and as they were fed by manna, so we are fed from the manna. We have to be careful. In the natural order of things, you know there are other things now you can get in the shops beside the loaf of bread. They can so can them up to-day and place them on the market, and extol the virtues for health and vigour and life, yet there is nothing that has yet superseded the loaf of bread. So we can use this analogy. Is there not a lot put together as manna and bread in the churches and chapels around us. We have to be so careful when we are feeding each

other, and especially the lambs, that we are not giving them any of these concoctions of the world, but keeping to the manna of life, keeping to the words of Jesus himself.

Then, speaking of the duties of feeding the lambs, we look upon the faces of our brethren and sisters here, and find there are quite a lot of young needing our special care. It is not sufficient to get young ones from the Sunday School, that little training ground of the Truth, to bring them into the Truth, and let them just stay there. We realise there is a responsibility that they should be brought up in the fear and nurture and admonition of the Lord. We want to give them that atmosphere of the Truth, that encouragement to keep away from the alluring things of life; and lambs will wander, and as we have said before, the duty of the shepherd is to go and gather them together, to pick them up in his arms, and that is our duty to the younger ones. We must not neglect the lambs. Then what of the sheep? We do need to be reminded that as there is only one Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, so there is only one fold, and there are the dangers of the sheep wandering out of the fold. Let us exhort each other; let us so feed each other from the rich manna that God has provided, that we may all, in the loving mercy of God, be kept, be retained, in the fold, helping each other to remain in Jesus Christ. The nearer we are getting to the coming of the Lord, the greater will be the dangers of wandering away from the fold. The dangers are insidious, they come with such a pleasing effect, and they come very small at the start, and lead us away into greater things, away from the true, real green pastures of the Truth. There are these dangers to-day; we all know them, and hence the duty of us all—while God has given us in His mercy health and strength and vitality — to work out our salvation — we must realise this is not a selfish position to take up—there is no dog-in-the-manger policy in the Truth—we have to help each other, and we can do it in our prayers and in our exhortations and in our deportment in life.

Many things we could enlarge upon in reference to this beautiful theme of "Feed my lambs, Feed my sheep," but let us just see the consummation of it all. We said just now there is but one fold, as there is but one Shepherd, but what a grand time is coming when the sheep of these times of probation and the lambs will all be gathered. Now you see some of the sheep going along—something is the matter with this leg, something is the matter with this head, and there is something the matter with that arm. These are some of the things that come along as we are going through the wilderness. The way to the Kingdom is not strewn as a carpet, for that would not develop patience and reliance upon God. If in the goodness and the mercy of God (and everyone will need it in that day), we are placed on the right-hand side, the sheep will be there—and the goats on the left; but those on the right-hand side, they have allowed their heavenly Father to regenerate their hearts and minds. The mental and moral process of regeneration has passed and gone, and now there is the crowning work of regeneration; these bodies are to be changed, and all the sheep are immortal, to live in those pastures for ever more, partakers of the tree of life in the midst of the Paradise of Deity. One fold, all the sheep clothed upon with that house from heaven. This is our heart's desire, is it not? May our reflections this morning from those loving words of Jesus help us all to attain to that, for Christ's sake.

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