

The Shepherd of The Sheep

By G.V. Growcott

"Verity, verily, I say unto to you, he that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber" (Jn. 10: 1).

JOHN CHAPTER TEN

We may wonder why, in introducing such a beautiful and comforting picture, he should start out with the dark and negative aspect, but unquestionably divine wisdom has a good reason, and it is profitable for us to ponder on it.

In such a picture, we are apt to be entranced with the beauty, and forget that the goodness of God is hedged with very narrow limits and solemn warnings, and it is "severity" and not "goodness" to all who ignore those warnings.

"Some other way."

The flesh always wants to do it "some other way" -- some way that pleases us. This is the whole basis and significance of the temptation of Christ: "Some other way."

There is only one way -- GOD'S Way: and we have to keep relentlessly bringing ourselves back to it. "Some other way" sums up the whole lesson of the chapter -- the whole story of salvation.

It is all comprised in the climactic, joyful agony of the Garden of Gethsemane --

"Not my will, but Thine, be done."

"He that loseth his life shall find it."

"A thief and a robber."

A thief is that which is devious and deceptive -- anything not perfectly honest and pure and in harmony with Truth --

"Thou desireth Truth in the inward parts."

A robber is that which is violent and aggressive -- anything that seeks its ends by force and pressure and self-assertion. These are the two basic ways of the flesh.

"He that entereth in by the Door is the Shepherd of the sheep."

This parable has a wide range of application. We see this by the fact that Jesus says (v. 7). "I am the Door," and in verse 11, "I am the Shepherd."

He is both. He is also the Sheep. He is everything. This is the first great lesson: HE IS EVERYTHING.

This is the ideal and conception to which we must gradually, painfully, stumblingly, but steadily shape our lives, so that we may, more and more peacefully, and truthfully, and understandingly, say with Paul --

"To me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Until we have reached this point, we have not found peace. We are not, in the fullest sense, in the fold and of the sheep. We have not in the fullest sense, brought ourselves into a true, intimate, and saving relationship to the Good Shepherd --

"To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

"To him the Porter openeth."

If Christ is the Door, and the Shepherd, who or what is the Porter? Is that Christ, too? Yes, in a sense it is. At least, it is the spirit of Christ -- the "Spirit of Christ in the Prophets."

It is true we cannot force these types too stiffly and mechanically. We must rather by meditation gradually feel the depth and beauty and fittingness and interrelationship of the symbols -- gradually absorb the spirit of the picture. To pin each aspect down mechanically and unalterably is to destroy the life and depth and movement, to make it flat and dead.

The Porter is the Guardian of the Door: the Rejector of the Unfit: the Examiner and Approver of all who enter in. Basically, it is the Spirit of God, the Word, the Truth: but it takes various forms and manifestations.

In a very large sense, Moses and his God-inspired writings constitute the Porter -- the Chief Servant in the House of God, preparing for the entrance of the Son -- the Schoolmaster to lead unto Christ --

"Moses wrote of me. . ."

"All things written in the Law must be fulfilled concerning me."

Moses was something very special to God. God made this clear when Aaron and Miriam questioned his position --

"My servant Moses is not so: with him will I speak mouth to mouth" (Num. 12).

"... as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Ex. 33).

The same chapter records --

"The man Moses was very meek, above all men upon the face of the earth."

And Paul says (Heb. 11) he --

"Esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt."

His Christlike character was the secret of his special relationship to God.

The way to this special intimacy with God is open to us all. It is just a question of how much we really want it, and what we are prepared to give up to get it. It is not given lightly. There must be sacrifice. But it is given freely to those who seek it with all their heart.

In another harmonious and related sense, John the Baptist was the Porter. John -- the last and greatest of the long prophetic line of which Moses was pre-eminently and outstandingly the first and the head. Of John, Jesus said --

"Among them that are born of women, there hath not risen a greater than John."

"To him the Porter openeth."

From Moses to John the faithful Porter guarded the Door. Finally the Great Shepherd came, to whom they had all given witness, and on Jordan's banks the last great Porter opened the Door of the Fold --

"Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world."

We note again the strange depths and beauty of the symbolism. Jesus is not only the Door, and the Shepherd, and the spirit of the Porter -- he is also pre-eminently the Sheep -- the Lamb of God -- the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

"To him the Porter openeth, and the sheep hear his voice" (v. 3).

"THE SHEEP HEAR HIS VOICE." This is the second great lesson and testimony of the parable. This is the test and badge of the true sheep. So many claim to be his sheep who refuse or neglect to "hear his voice" -- who ignore his testimony and instructions when they run counter to their own fleshly thoughts and desires.

But the true sheep are eager and anxious to learn and to conform to the holy spirit of his teachings. They freely recognize their helpless inability to direct their own steps unaided. Though the way he leads is narrow and hard, and many turn from it to the pleasant way of the flesh, the true sheep say with Peter --

"Where shall we go? Thou only hast the words of eternal life."

There are many, many voices calling to the sheep -- pleasant, and desirable, and wonderfully appealing voices. But there is one voice of the true Shepherd of Life, one gentle voice which says --

"Regardless of all your natural, animal feelings, THIS is the best, and highest, and most joyful way."

"And he calleth his own sheep by name" (v. 3).

He is calling US by name. It is not a formal, standard, chilling, impersonal, blanket, form-invitation, but the warm, living, personal, individual approach of intimacy and love.

He knows and addresses each one separately and affectionately, as a close and beloved friend. He knows each one of us if we are his. He knows all our problems and hopes, our sorrows and our joys, as no human being of our acquaintance, however intimate, can possibly know them.

The personal relationship between the Shepherd and each sheep is the key to all the living power of the Gospel of Salvation. Salvation is a matter of personal communion and unity with Christ. We MUST establish that personal unity: everything depends upon it.

Christ must be real and close to us -- more real and more close and more intimate than any human relationship.

We must live constantly in the atmosphere of this close companionship -- always pausing to renew it as we awake each morning; always closing the day with thankful meditation on its blessings.

Under a different figure, he emphasizes this in the Parable of the Vine --

"Abide in me, and I in you. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit, for without me ye can do nothing."

"Without me ye can do nothing."

Attached directly to him, as part of him, looking constantly unto him, drawing continual strength from him -- we bring forth fruit unto holiness and righteousness.

On our own, no matter how hard we try, no matter how good our intentions, we struggle vainly, and flounder, and sink.

But here the figure is the Shepherd and the Sheep.

The typical characteristics of sheep are: helplessness, defenselessness, non-resistance, submission, complete dependence on the care of the Shepherd, and the need of leadership and guidance.

These characteristics are not what the world considers desirable, but they are the characteristics of wisdom and life for man in his weak, mortal state.

Sheep seem to be the animal most closely associated with man from the beginning, both practically and symbolically the one particularly and providentially provided to supply his needs in food and clothing, and also symbolically to fill his spiritual needs.

Although we are not specifically told at the time, from every consideration, and from the reference in Revelation to the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world," it would seem clear that it was a lamb whose skin God used to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve, in token of the Great Sacrifice later to be made in the fulness of the times.

And the basic sacrifice of the Law -- the Daily Sacrifice -- was a lamb, offered each morning and each evening perpetually.

"He calleth his own Sheep by name."

In modern sheep-raising, the individual aspect is lost. They are raised impersonally in the mass. This is very efficient, but mass efficiency has a way of destroying the individual life and meaning of things. All progress is not progress.

Sheep respond to the individual approach of love and care. They lose their shyness and fear and blank non-individuality. They develop personal affection and attachment. Doubtless, in

the marvelous Providence of God, all living creatures are this way in some degree; certainly human beings are.

I was greatly impressed with this characteristic of sheep in Texas, and with the deep lessons in shepherdship and inter-responsibility that it teaches. I have seen sheep raised as pets who would not stay with the common flock, nor follow the common habits of sheep, but who wanted always to be with those who had raised them and shown them affection and care.

Salvation -- and the proclamation of salvation -- is in many ways a very personal and intimate process.

There is no such thing as an "ecclesia." It is a convenient fiction, like a "corporation," but it has no tangible reality. There are only individual brethren and sisters.

The more closely they are knit together in heart and thought and love, the more fully the ecclesial entity emerges, but we must always clearly think of the personal, individual sheep, and never blur our vision into just seeing the flock as a mass.

Truly, great and spectacular things can be done with flocks, as such. Power and wealth and influence are always built on manipulating the mass. The multitude wanted to make him a king -- and how easy it would have been! How much great and spectacular good he could have done for the masses, as their king! --

"All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me."

Did he not have a duty -- a responsibility -- to operate on the largest scale -- to spread "good" as widely as possible, to as many as possible? It is the argument of the well-meaning of the world today. And many, too, who should know better, say we should seek Divine ends by worldly, co-operative means.

But he chose the slow, hard, unspectacular, individual way. He chose to be a simple, obscure shepherd, and to call his sheep one by one, by name.

We cannot deal with ecclesias as masses. We cannot think of them as masses. It is the modern, efficient, lifeless, natural way. We must consider the sheep individually -- get to know them individually -- approach them individually in love.

This is why Paul fills the salutations of his letters with so many names. He thinks of them all separately, one by one. He could not, being Paul, forbear that word of loving remembrance for each one.

"He calleth his own sheep by name."

The more individual people we know -- truly know in the sense of getting heart to heart in mutual understanding and sympathy and comfort -- not to criticize but to sympathize -- the fuller and richer and more Christlike is our life -- the closer we are to the Great Shepherd of the sheep.

The more we are self-centered in our own affairs and interests and personal welfare and enjoyment, the emptier and cheaper and more useless is our life. As we shall read together soon (Jn. 12:24-26) --

"Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone":

"But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit -- "

We must each die, to bring forth fruit. Continuing, verse 25 --

"He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him FOLLOW me."

Returning to chapter 10 --

"He calleth his own sheep by name; and leadeth them out."

There is a being kept safely in the fold, and there is also -- at the same time -- a being led out under the care and guidance of the Shepherd.

The first "leading out" is when we are called: when the Shepherd first calls our name, calls us unto him, invites us to be part of his flock -- to accept his love and care, to put our faith and dependence in him.

This is a leading from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from the loneliness and helplessness and purposelessness of a sad natural life to the joy and friendship and companionship of the glories and beauties of eternal things. He leads us out of the blind, wandering mass of shepherdless sheep, and gives our life a meaning and a purpose.

There is also a daily leading out of the fold. Each day as we arise to the day's activities, we must listen to the Shepherd's voice, and follow him. Only when we are consciously and faithfully doing this are we safe.

We are never on our own. We do not set our own course. We do not choose our own path and circumstances in this life. When we try to, we are lost, wandering, self-willed sheep.

It is a characteristic of sheep to tend to forget to listen to the shepherd, to wander thoughtlessly, and to go astray and get lost, and get into danger and harm. They must be watched over, and called, and reminded. Here the type is perfect.

In another parable the love and care and concern of the True Shepherd for the lost and wandering sheep is beautifully and comfortingly illustrated. He searches the dark mountainside till he finds it.

But the individual lesson for us is to give constant heed to the Shepherd's voice, and keep close to him. Some lost sheep are never found.

As soon as the sheep loses touch with the Shepherd, it is on the wrong path and in danger. Many things in this life can attract the attention away from the Shepherd's voice -- pleasing and attractive and desirable things.

It is certain that if we always keep our personal relationship of love with Christ strong and clear and uppermost in our minds, we would never do anything to grieve him -- never do anything out of harmony with his goodness and holiness.

There is no power like the power of intimate, personal affection. It is this we must develop toward the Shepherd by meditating on his goodness, to combat all other influences in our lives.

"And when he putteth forth the sheep, he goeth before them" (v. 4).

This is the mark of the True Shepherd, as hearing his voice is the mark of the true sheep. The True Shepherd "goes before" and leads the way. So Christ has experienced all things -- been "tempted and tried in all points like his brethren."

He sets no path before them that he has not trod. The most secret and intimate of our personal struggles -- he has known them, and understands.

He does not direct or instruct; he demonstrates and leads. He is the model of beauty, the pattern of holiness, the great and perfect example of the dark, glorious bittersweet Way of Sorrow, Joy, and Peace.

He gave up all things in this life that are sought after and considered desirable, and he unswervingly followed the one straight course of doing the Father's will always, and thinking only of the welfare of the sheep.

He was given a life-long course of self-denial and submission and humility to follow, even to the cruelest and most exposed and shameful of deaths, and he unhesitatingly followed that path in perfect patience and love.

It is on the basis of this life of sacrifice for us that he asks our love, and offers his love to us.

Love, to be sound and true, must be based upon a mutual recognition of spiritual excellence. It is true we must love, and manifest love toward, all mankind. It must be a basic aspect of our character to dedicate our lives to the good of all. Jesus loved the rich young ruler, even as the young man rejected him for the sake of riches.

But this is a different thing from the love spoken of when it is said of Jesus --

"Having loved his own, he loved them unto the end."

This was the deep, personal, reciprocated affection of and for the true sheep. It is said specifically of John, as distinguished from the others, that he was "the disciple that Jesus loved."

Why did he single out John for this distinction. Undoubtedly because there was in John the most to love.

Love -- true spiritual love -- is the joyful, enlightened, mutual attraction of spirituality -- and the deeper the spirituality, the deeper the love. It is by contemplating the beauties of Christ's life and character -- its infinite superiority over the common life of natural, animal man -- that our love is deepened and developed. And we learn from the Song of Songs that Christ's love for those who are his is built on the same spiritual foundation.

To become a part of Christ's love, we must constantly strive to make ourselves spiritually lovable.

We must, therefore, constantly endeavour to develop beauty of character, and eliminate all fleshliness and selfishness and ugliness and roughness. This eternal principle of spiritual attraction is strikingly illustrated in verse 17 --

"THEREFORE doth my Father love me: because I lay down my life for the sheep."

Not because Jesus was His Son, but because he was perfectly and lovingly obedient, even unto death. Jesus says himself of natural relationship --

"Who are my mother and my brethren?"

And Paul said (2 Cor. 5:16) --

"I would not even know Jesus Christ after the flesh."

The flesh is nothing. Only the spiritual relationship counts -- only the sweet spiritual oneness of the heart and thought and character --

"Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life for the sheep."

He overcame and put to death in his nature all of the things that stand in the way of perfect love.

Love -- real, true, sound, spiritual love -- is not something that just happens. It is strictly a matter of cause and effect -- spiritual cause and spiritual effect. God loved Jesus because he, in loving obedience, dedicated his life to goodness and unselfishness and the service of others, and therefore made himself spiritually lovable. God will love us only on the same basis: He is no respecter of persons.

True spiritual love is the result of the irresistible attraction of mutual spirituality; and it is not a small, selfish, suspicious, restrictive, possessive, exclusive thing -- like natural, fleshly love. Love "believeth all things, hopeth all things, beareth all things, endureth all things."

And finally -- when at last we shall see him face to face, and no longer "through a glass darkly" -- UNDERSTANDETH all things.

It has nothing in common with the flesh --

"The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary the one to the other."

God is Love -- pure Love -- because He is Spirit.

"Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life for the sheep."

"So ought we to give our lives for the brethren."

May God help us to follow this narrow way of life -- to rise out of the weakness of the flesh into the joy and power of the Spirit!

The most unlovely and unlovable thing is selfishness and smallness of mind -- self-centeredness -- thinking of ourselves, talking of ourselves, seeking our own desires and welfare. This is the natural man: ugly and repulsive in the sight of God. This is the sad and self-destructive perversion of man's true noble place in the purpose of God. God may pity such, because of its pitiable emptiness and ugliness, but He cannot love it, or accept it to Himself, for it is ungodly and of the flesh.

Each grain of corn, says Jesus, must fall to the ground and die, before it can bring forth fruit.

It cannot stay wrapped up in its own hard shell. It must fall, it must come low; it must make contact with the ground. It must face exposure to the weather and the open sky -- the raw, unsheltered realities of life.

It must soften, and open up, and give of its own inner substance to reach out roots all around it; it must reach upward, toward the Light and toward the Sun; it must by the marvelous power of that Light, long gazed upon, transform dead substances into growing, living, reproducing cells -- before it can bring forth fruit, and justify its existence, and be a vital, living part of nature's glorious cycle of life and interdependence and mutual support.

Christ is the great example in far more things, and in far more ways, than we ever dream of. He is the Way, and the only Way. The sheep must follow the Shepherd -- closely and all the way -- if they desire to share the life he has.

Toward the end of the chapter (v. 34), Jesus calls attention to those remarkable, almost unbelievable, words of God to His people, through the Psalmist --

"I have said, Ye are gods, and every one of you children of the Most High."

"YE ARE GODS." This is our high calling in Christ --

"As many as received him, to them gave he power to become sons of God."

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit."

"If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do put to death the deeds of the body, ye shall LIVE!"

"I have said: Ye are gods!"

What do these things mean to us? Are we preaching, living, manifesting just HALF a Gospel -- just a dead skeleton of words?

Or does our witness to the world have the life and power of complete personal dedication? John said --

"Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God!"

"And when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

"Every man that hath this hope in him puriflet himself, even as he is pure."

How could anyone who truly HAS this glorious hope in him help but purify himself, and never rest until all the oppressing impurities of mind, body, and spirit have been put away.

The power -- the driving force -- is the love of the Shepherd

"We shall be LIKE HIM, for we shall see him as he is."

It is not holiness and glory as such that we must contemplate. These alone are fearful things -- infinitely, hopelessly above our mortal frailties and uncleannesses and limitations.

We are creatures of weakness and ignorance and continual, frustrating failure and disappointment -- with ourselves and with our circumstances. And yet, it is such as we are that are called to holiness and purity and godliness and strength.

It would be a mockery of our weak mortality, except that the call is in the resistless power of love --

"Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed on us. . ."

"I am the Good Shepherd: the Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. . ."

"Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends."

THIS is the power of salvation! THIS is the path to joy and hope --

"That a man lay down his life -- give up everything for his friends."

We see many letters in the newspapers from soldiers in Vietnam, letters from men who love life and do not want to die, but who -- FOR AN IDEAL -- have risen to the joy of laying down their lives for their friends.

These are people of the world. They do it misguidedly for a corruptible crown. They do it in darkness concerning the glorious Gospel of Life. A contemplation of them is very humbling, very self- searching.

Man -- the selfish, sinful, lustful, earthbound creature -- has great God-given capacities of nobility and self-sacrifice, if he is deeply moved by an ideal -- if the right chords in his heart are found and struck. The secret is finding the ideal, the motive, and the power.

What of us? How do we stand? How do WE compare -- the self-professed children of God -- with the nobility and selflessness and bravery and sacrifice to which men of the world sometimes rise?

"Ye are gods: and every one of you children of the Most High."

Are we LIVING as such -- as something very special in the earth? Can we honestly stand forth to the world and say --

"Examine how we live; examine our love and devotion, our selflessness, our dedication to the welfare of others and of all mankind -- we who claim the lofty title and position of children of God."

We have recently read together again the marvelous 119th Psalm, every word of which extols the inspiring beauty and transforming power of the Divine Word -- that which alone can change us from men to gods, from impurity to purity, from death to life.

It is the greatest of all mysteries: and yet it is no mystery at all. It is simple cause and effect.

The Word will transform us: expand our minds, enlarge our hearts, purify our thoughts, banish our fears, open our understandings, and give us the power to be glorious, holy, eternal sons of God in the midst of a wicked, fleshly, sinful, perishing world -- IF we will but let it in to do its work -- if we will expose ourselves enough to it.

"MY sheep HEAR MY VOICE, and I know them, and they FOLLOW ME."

-- they hear his voice, and they follow him.

"The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want."

What is it that we shall not want? Is it a promise of material sufficiency? It cannot be, for many of God's most faithful children have experienced bitter lack in that direction -- even to loss of life itself.

Is it spiritual sufficiency? To limit it to any particular need is to limit it unjustifiably.

"I shall not want" goes much deeper. It is an inner, peaceful FRAME OF MIND -- a way of life, a quiet, joyful acceptance of whatever does or does not come: seeking nothing, desiring nothing, knowing God's way is best, and that all things work together for good.

"The Lord is my Shepherd."

Herein, in this assurance itself, all wants and all needs are fully and abundantly satisfied. There is nothing else to want -- nothing else worth wanting. If we have God, what else can there possibly be that we lack? He knows so much better than we do what we need, and what is best for us.

IN THE FULL, THANKFUL, JOYFUL ACCEPTANCE OF THIS FACT IS PEACE, AND JOY, AND LIFE EVERLASTING.

If we have this, we are complete; we are satisfied: we are content. We have all we need, all we could ask. If anything is added, we are thankful, and we enjoy it; but we feel no urgency or especial desire. Everything else is relatively secondary and unimportant --

"Godliness with contentment is great gain."

"Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall have rest unto your souls."

"Be content with such things as ye have."

-- and be thankful for God's loving hand in whatever may come -- of good or ill, of gain or loss, of pleasure or pain -- all is of His love and wisdom --

"The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want."