

The Fold and the Flock

by John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby's sermon emphasizes Jesus as the Good Shepherd who calls His flock out of the fold of Israel, offering them salvation and guidance in grace.

Scripture: Psalm 23, Isaiah 40:10-11, Ezekiel 34:11-16, Matthew 3:7-12, John 10:1-30, Hebrews 2:11

Topics: "Jesus as the Good Shepherd", "Salvation and Security"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the significance of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in the context of His ministry to Israel, illustrating how His role is not just to lead but to provide salvation and security to His flock. He explains that the fold represents the religious system of Israel, which was failing to recognize the true Shepherd, leading to a moral testing of the nation. Darby highlights the dual effect of Christ's ministry: drawing those who accept Him while exposing the hearts of those who reject Him. He contrasts the Good Shepherd's selfless love with the hireling's abandonment, affirming that true security and sustenance come from following Christ, who offers eternal life and protection. Ultimately, the sermon calls believers to recognize their relationship with Christ, the Shepherd who knows them intimately and secures their salvation.

Transcript

John 10:1-30.

The force and beauty of this chapter are often missed, through failing to notice the circumstances in our Lord's ministry, which impart to it its special character.

Much has been often advanced in illustration of the office of our Lord as "the Good Shepherd," and it may be with a measure of truth; but the parable before us which presents him in this character, applies itself to the condition of Israel, before God, as brought to light by the ministry of the blessed Son of God, in grace, amongst that people.

It is of Israel especially that the Lord says, "Ye, my flock, the flock of my pasture are men; and I am your God." Hence any application of the terms, "entering in by the door into the sheepfold," or "climbing up some other way," to a sinner's coming to Christ, or, which is more common, to any supposed entrance into the church is, to say the least, a misapprehension and a misapplication of a most important and instructive passage.

If, then, Israel be God's flock, Jerusalem, or, at any rate, that system of ordinances which separated Israel from the surrounding nations, and of which Jerusalem was the centre, was the fold. The fold into which Christ is here proving His right and title to enter; and in connection with which He presents, by way of parable, the effects of His personal ministry as the true, but disallowed, Shepherd of Israel.

"This parable spake Jesus unto them; but they understood not what things they were which He spake unto them." The glass which so accurately reflected their condition and circumstances was held up to them, but they were too much blinded by their prejudices to discern in it God's moral judgment of their state, and of their own responsibility.

In seeking then to understand this parable, which it is said the Jews understood not, it should be remembered that there was a twofold effect resulting from our Lord's ministry; namely, the attaching to Himself, in grace, those who, as taught of God, received His claims; and also the testing of the moral condition of those who rejected His mission; which, indeed, were the great mass of the nation. For if God's manifestation of Himself in grace does not convert the heart, it nevertheless puts the consciences of men in the light; and thus leaves them under the responsibility of rejecting the light, and hating the light, because their deeds are evil.

This was pre-eminently true of our Lord's ministry; but in every dispensation it holds good, and, "wisdom is justified of all her children."

Of John the Baptist's ministry it is said, "all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him."

The light of God, in whatever vessel it shines, is recognised and rejoiced in where the heart and conscience are in exercise before Him; and it puts under responsibility those by whom it is rejected.

A little consideration of this will throw light upon the present chapter.

John the Baptist was intermediate between "the law and the prophets," and the coming of our Lord; and his mission was to disclose the moral condition of the people, and by the baptism of repentance to prepare them for the speedy advent of their expected Messiah. But, more than this; he was also set to preach a remnant in Israel, or a separation from the mass of the people, of those who received his testimony. Hence a distinct baptism was attached to his ministry, as the formal seal of that separation which was to be administered to all who obeyed his word. This was a circumstance which marked him off from all preceding prophets, who, whatever might be the force of their ministry, had no commission to effect an outward and formal separation of those who received their testimony. A moral separation there must, of course, always have been between those that feared the Lord, and those that rejected His word. But the ministry of John marks an epoch in the dealings of the Lord with the nation. Hence the language of Matt. 3:7-12, "When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance [a baptism which separated by the confession of sins to the hope of coming mercy and salvation]: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost [a baptism which separates to God by the

power and presence of God; making those who receive it the vessels of his power and presence], and with fire [a baptism of judgment which Christ when He returns will assuredly bring upon those who have rejected His claims as witnessed by the Holy Ghost]: Whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor, and gather His wheat into the garner; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Now, it is exactly at this point that in the Gospel of Matthew, our Lord's ministry is said to commence. He associates Himself with this remnant in Israel, separated by John's baptism; and He Himself is baptized with John's baptism. Not, indeed, as if He needed repentance, as the reason He gives for submitting to it sufficiently shows. "He said, Suffer it to be so now; for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." It was as fulfilling all righteousness that Jesus was baptized. But in thus owning this ordinance of God in the hand of John, our Lord at the same time associates Himself with this movement of God's Spirit on the hearts of a remnant in Israel, and fulfilled the gracious words of the sixteenth Psalm; "Thou art my Lord; my goodness extendeth not to thee; but to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent in whom is all my delight."

Stooping thus low in love and grace, and in self-emptying obedience, he is in a position to declare God's name to his brethren. For the Apostle applies the first words of this Psalm to Christ, in connection with the declaration (Heb. 2:11), that "both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren. Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the Church will I sing praise unto thee. And again, I will put my trust in Him. And again, Behold I and the children which God hath given me. Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."

But being what He was, as Son of God, as well as the humbled Son of man, He is found receiving this remnant, who were the sheep, whom He "calls by name and leads them out;" or "the poor of the flock," - "of the flock of slaughter" - of the eleventh of Zechariah; where Christ is prophetically presented as the Shepherd of God's appointment to Israel; on which this chapter in part, and His personal ministry as detailed in Matthew, especially, forms a striking comment.

The first thing, then, which the Lord marks is, that He had entered by the door into the sheepfold, thus proving his authority from the owner of the flock, to take charge of the sheep, in opposition to any surreptitious entrance, which of itself convicts of a sinister design. As He says, "He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But He that entereth in by the door the same is the Shepherd of the sheep."

Christ is here, then, Jehovah's divinely sanctioned Shepherd of Israel, who were the "people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand;" - for He had submitted to every requisition of the owner of the flock: - but at this time, alas! proved to be "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." For the mass of the nation, and especially the rulers of the people, blinded by a false estimate of their condition before God, and entrenched in religious ordinances, knew not the person of Him who came in grace to meet their need; nor heeded the divinely-sanctioned claims of Him who, "when He saw the multitudes, was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad as sheep having no shepherd." "Their own shepherds pity them not!" Hence, having stated, as another mark of His proved title to be the Shepherd of the sheep that, "to Him the porter openeth," and the "sheep hear His voice," He adds, "He calleth His own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when He putteth forth his own sheep, He

goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him; for they now His voice." And here we may be reminded of the beautiful keeping of the figure; and be referred to the customs of oriental countries as verifying this description of the Shepherd's preceding His flock, when leading them from the fold to their pasture, or when conducting them from pasture to pasture. But it is not the correspondence of a description with physical facts or with a known usage that is here in question. It is the application of this peculiar action of the shepherd, by way of parable, to show, as in a glass, what was then taking place under the action of our Lord's ministry, as necessarily modified by the moral condition of Israel, which was being tested and proved by His presence amongst them.

In a word, it expresses the moral effect of our Lord's ministry, when received in grace, as in the example of the poor blind man in the preceding chapter, and also the effect of the disallowance of His claims on the part of the leaders and the mass of the nation.

In the one case, it was the Lord "calling his own sheep by name, and leading them out" - for the result of their attachment, in grace, to him was their being virtually, if not actually, excommunicated like "the blind man" referred to, and thus outside (led outside by the Good Shepherd) of all Israel's ordinances, and clean apart from every ground of connection with God, but that $\hat{A}$ which was found in the person of Christ. While, on the other hand, it was virtually the Lord's saying, as in the prophet, "I will no more pity the inhabitants of the land - but, lo, I will deliver the men every one into his neighbour's hand, and into the hand of his king; and they shall smite the land, and out of their hand I will not deliver them." And again, "Then said I, I will not feed you: that that dieth, let it die; and that that is to be cut off, let it be cut off; and let the rest eat every one the flesh of another."

Thus, through the rejection of the claims of our Lord to be the Shepherd of Jehovah's flock, the fold is deserted by Him who alone could lead into green pastures, or give security to the sheep. But leading outside the fold His own sheep, He in effect says to them, "I will feed the flock of slaughter, even you, O poor of the flock." And how blessed to be under the care of such a Shepherd! though it be outside all man's religion, and apart from the whole array of Israel's divinely appointed ordinances. For it was in the maintenance of these, in opposition to a living faith, as the grounds of connection with God, that the claims of this blessed Shepherd were disallowed.

One might turn with deepest interest to the descriptions of the thirty-fourth of Ezekiel, in illustration of Israel's happiness, when, in a future day, the Lord will set aside, in power, the claims of every false shepherd that has neglected or preyed upon the flock, and will Himself take charge of His beautiful flock. As He says, "For thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment." Or it might be thought an omission not to refer to the twenty-third Psalm, as an illustration of the present experience of a believer under the exercise of Christ's shepherd-care. And surely nothing can exceed the beauty and comfort of that Psalm, nor the richness of the portion of the soul which can say, "Jehovah is my Shepherd,

I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth, me beside the still waters." The certainty that want will never be the condition of the soul that reposes in such a Shepherd as Jehovah, and is owned of Him, may, in its largest, widest, application, be affirmed; and that quietness and refreshment are the natural blessings to the soul that flow from being under his hand. But this is not all that our souls require; alas! as it is not all in the natural application of the figure. The silly sheep may stray from the rich and quiet pastures, and need the Shepherd's care to follow it in its wanderings, and restore it again to where the flock abides, under His gentle eye. Hence the touching expressions, "He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." This is a different exercise of the Shepherd's care from that of making to lie down in green pastures and leading beside still waters. It is recovery, in gracious love, when these have been departed from; and it affords the most affecting acquaintance with the grace of the heart of the Lord. When thus restored, the soul may add, "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."

Nothing so strengthens the confidence of the soul in the Lord as the experience of the exercise of his gentle restoring grace. It so introduces the heart to the interior resources of God's goodness, and so establishes it in his unfailing mercy, that confidence in all imaginable trials, and an assurance of receiving nothing but good at his hand, are the natural result. The darkest paths of difficulty and of danger - "The valley of death's shade" may be tracked in perfect security now, because the soul has been shown the only proper spring of confidence. "thou art with me: Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." And more than this - the sense of surrounding enemies can now be used not as an occasion of dread, but as only giving character to the efficiency of that goodness which prepares a table before us, in the presence of enemies. "Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over." This is not the result of an increase of outward good, nor the mere effusion of thankfulness at the contemplation of the increase of corn and wine - this may not exist - but it is the renewing of holy joy from the experience of what God is; and the overrunning-cup is the sense of the heart's portion in the presence of a God of infinite goodness. The conclusion, therefore, from such an association with God, and such experience of what God is in goodness and love, is, "Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." All this, and much more than this, readily presents itself to the mind, while contemplating this lovely Psalm; but the chapter before us is not so much intended to teach generally the shepherd-care of Christ, as to disclose the present principles of his action resulting from Israel's rejection of His claims. For it is in Israel, and amongst an earthly people, that His proper shepherd-character will be displayed. As a proof (see Isaiah 40:10, 11), "Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young." And (Psalm 78:70-72) "He chose David also his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds: from following the ewes great with young he brought him to feed Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance. So he fed them according to the integrity of his heart; and guided them by the skilfulness of his hands." Hence, when he has given the remnant, whom His personal ministry was now separating to Himself, the necessary authority and guidance to leave the fold, which was His having called them by name (the mark of individual dealing in grace), and having Himself gone out before them, He takes an entirely new place and position.

He now says, "I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9). This is no mere reiteration of the previous parable, which it is said the Jews did not understand; but it is the unfolding of the true position in which He now stood to all who were taught of

God to acknowledge His claims. He does not present Himself as the door into a fold; but as the door of salvation. "By me if any man enter in he shall be saved!" "And he shall go in and out and find pasture." It is the acknowledgment of His personal claims, in faith; and the result is, not security in a fold, but salvation and liberty, and sustenance. Neither does He now address Himself as before, to His own sheep within the fold, in order to lead them out; but it is, "If any man enter in he shall be saved," etc., which took up the outcasts of Israel and opened the door of grace to all.

It is indeed a tacit indication, that another principle of God's dealing must be known, and another position taken by those who were owned of Him.

It is not now enclosing in a fold of ordinances in separation from those without; but it is salvation through the Shepherd who gives the life for the sheep, and security and pasturage in following Him. It is the presence of the Shepherd, and not the walls of a fold, that we must seek.

It is not, as is generally known, when speaking of the gathering of the Gentiles, as the other sheep who were not of the Jewish fold, the gathering them to a fold: - for the word is changed, and it is, "There shall be one flock and one shepherd."

"The Good Shepherd," and the "True Vine," present the Lord in contrast with all that existed in Israel's vine of ordinances, and every pretender to the care of the flock as having a right to them before He came. United to Him as the True Vine, they become fruitful branches; and as the Good Shepherd, He not only gives His life for the sheep, but He gives eternal life and eternal security to those whom He thus owns as His flock.

The difference between the door into the fold, by which Christ entered, and Himself as the door of the sheep should be noticed, in order to have the line of instruction clear before the mind. In the one case, it was the appointed way of Christ's entrance amongst the Jews as the Shepherd of Israel, and living Messiah, in His earthly ministrations to that ancient flock of God; and in the other, it was the place which He took in grace as the rejected One of the nation - the door of salvation to all who entered by Him. Not the door into any fold of exclusive ordinances, as in Israel, which He was now leaving Himself, and thus leading out His own sheep; but the door of entrance to salvation, to liberty and sustenance; and where security would be found alone in being near and following the Good Shepherd.

Nothing can be more touching or instructive than the contrast presented between the conduct and feelings of the "hireling," and Himself as "the Good Shepherd." With Christ there is no fleeing like the hireling when danger appears, but in love and self-devotion to His sheep meeting all the danger, saying to the enemy, "If ye seek me, let these go their way."

"The Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep" - Israel as His sheep - those lost sheep of the house of Israel - and for the "other sheep" also which are not of Israel's fold - which are gathered and brought by His death from amongst the Gentiles, that thus there should be "one flock, one shepherd" ({Greek} mia poimne eis poimen). But this is spoken of as consequent upon His death - for, indeed, whether of Jew or Gentile there could be no association with God or enjoyment of salvation apart from his death.

The reciprocation of the knowledge subsisting between the Good Shepherd and His sheep is also marked. He knows His sheep and they know Him; even as the Father knew Him, and He knew the Father. It is not a mere abstract statement of a reciprocation of knowledge, but an illustration of the character of that knowledge. He, the blessed Son, who had given His life and was in heaven, ere this gathering of His other

sheep took place, or even the remnant of Israel was gathered by virtue of His death, knew His own, even as the Father knew Him, when He was upon earth. Nothing can be more precious to the soul than such a principle as this! And how simply, yet how wonderfully, is the link of connection between Christ and His sheep presented, and their eternal security declared! "My sheep hear my voice - and I know them - and they follow me - and I give unto them eternal life!" But this is not all. He adds, "They shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand. My Father who gave them me is greater than all; none is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one." What a link of connection is this! The poor sheep, precious to Christ as the Father's gift to Him! What a ground also of security! The sheep not only have eternal life from Christ, but they are in His hand! Nay more, the thought of their security must be knit up with the eternal power of God - for the sheep are in the Father's hand! And then the contrasted points brought together of the lowly Shepherd stooping to enter by the door into the fold - and the statement, "I and my Father are one!" Nothing can be more touching, nothing more precious or wonderful! The grace is infinite, the love knows no bounds, and the power by which all is secured is the Almighty power of the Eternal God! The depth of instruction in the chapter is but just touched upon in this brief paper, but it may guide the meditations of some to the chapter itself, there to find the infinitude of divine love thus brought home to us as the portion of the sheep of Christ.

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