

The Shepherd of Israel

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Lord is the owner of the sheep and His ownership emphasizes His care and provision for them, but Israel's repudiation of Him led to their hardening of hearts and refusal to hear His voice.

Scripture: Psalm 77:20, Psalm 78:52, John 10:11, Acts 20:28

Topics: "The Good Shepherd", "Spiritual Hearing"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound relationship between the Shepherd and His sheep, illustrating how Jesus, as the good Shepherd, cares for His flock and offers them eternal life. He reflects on Israel's history, noting their rejection of God as their Shepherd, which led to their scattering and loss of guidance. Sparks highlights the importance of recognizing Jesus' ownership of His sheep and the marks that identify them, such as hearing His voice and following Him willingly. He warns against hardening our hearts and encourages believers to embrace their identity as part of the new flock under Christ's leadership. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deep, personal connection with the Shepherd, who desires companionship with His sheep.

Transcript

Reading: John 10

The heart of this chapter is in verse eleven: "I am the good shepherd". Let us put alongside of that the following passages of Scripture:

"Thou leddest thy people like a flock, by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Psalm 77:20).

"He led forth his own people like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock" (Psalm 78:52).

"Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:28-30).

"Now the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep with the blood of the eternal covenant, even our Lord Jesus, make you perfect in every good thing to do his will" (Hebrews 13:20,21).

Here we have the flock spoken of, both in the Old Testament and in the New. There need be no argument about the fact that the Lord looked upon Israel of old as His sheep. The nations were judged by God because of their treatment of His sheep: they destroyed and scattered them. God was very angry with the fake shepherds in Israel because they failed to fulfil their trust to the sheep. There is more, as we have seen, in the Psalms about Israel as the Lord's sheep.

We begin our meditation on this matter by speaking about the Lord as the owner of the sheep. That is the great point which governs this whole matter. The sheep belong to the Lord. They are His, and His ownership of them is emphasized everywhere. The sheep exist for the Shepherd, and the Shepherd exists for the sheep. The love of God for Israel as His sheep is to be noted everywhere. They were "the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (Psalm 95:7). The love of God for the old Israel was a very wonderful thing. What care He showed for His sheep in the wilderness! How, as a Shepherd, He provided water and pasture for them, even in a desert. How angry He was when anyone touched His sheep! Touch one of His sheep and you touch the Lord! The Lord claimed the ownership of His sheep, and because He owned them and they were His sheep, everything He did was because of that.

In these days we are seeing how God, on the one side, had to forsake Israel. The God who had so loved Israel, had been so jealous for them, had done everything that He could for them, had at last to accept their repudiation of Him as their Shepherd.

Why was that? It was not like God! It seems to be such a contradiction of Him. He would never, never do that if He could possibly avoid it. He had said: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3). It was a terrible thing for God to have to forsake Israel, but He HAD to do it. And today Israel is in that condition - no longer God's flock, as in old time. Those sheep are scattered over all the world, without a shepherd.

Why did that come about? Simply for this one reason: Israel's fatal sin was their repudiation of God as their one Shepherd. They turned to other gods and made them their shepherds. They followed their voices, and repudiated the sole ownership of the Lord. That great chapter, Isaiah 53, shows their attitude toward the Shepherd. A word rises out of that chapter: "All we like sheep have gone astray", and it goes on to show how Israel treated God's provided Shepherd.

It is impressive to note that the Apostle Paul quotes this very thing in his Letter to the Romans: "But they did not all hearken to the glad tidings. For Isaiah saith, Lord, who hath believed our report?" (Romans 10:16). Israel refused to believe the message of the prophets, and that message was all about God as the Shepherd and Israel as the sheep. And the prophet says: 'This is why they turned away from Jehovah... "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (Isaiah 6:6)... Away from the way of the Lord to their own way.' And their own way was to choose shepherds other than the Lord.

It is also impressive to notice that in Psalm 95:7, where the verse begins: "We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand", it goes on with this strange word: "Today, Oh, that ye would hear his voice! Harden not your heart". "We are the... sheep of his hand" - but the sheep can have very hard hearts and refuse to hear the Shepherd's voice. So to His sheep of old He said: "Today, Oh... harden not your heart".

Do you know that that very word is quoted at least three times in the Letter to the Hebrews? "Today if ye shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Hebrews 3:7,8). So it was hardness of heart, refusal to hear His voice, that lost Israel their Shepherd. Paul says in the Letter to the Romans: "I would not, brethren,

have you ignorant... that a hardening in part hath befallen Israel" (Romans 11:25), and you have only to read this chapter, John 10, to see the hard heart of Israel. It is a terrible thing!

Just look at it! Jesus has been speaking of Himself as the good Shepherd, who gives His life for the sheep. He has said: "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish" (verse 28). There are all these wonderful things about Himself as their Shepherd and about His sheep - and do you notice what happened? "There arose a division again among the Jews because of these words. And many of them said, He hath a devil" ... "I am the good shepherd... I lay down my life for the sheep I came that they may have life... I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish." He has said all these wonderful and beautiful things and the Jews said: "He hath a devil"!

Now do you understand why God had to cast them off? 'We have hardened our hearts. We have turned every one to our own way. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have gone away from the Shepherd because of self-will. in other words, we have said: "We will not that this man reign over us" (Luke 19:14).'

That is the Jewish background of this chapter. You can feel the atmosphere of antagonism, and you can feel how they hated Him. Presently they will take counsel that they may kill Him. He was right when He called them wolves who would destroy the sheep!

Jesus came right into that atmosphere and said: 'I am the good Shepherd, and I am going to lead My flock out of this. I am going to take them out of this setting and out of this false flock.' And so He leads the nucleus of His new flock and gives unto them eternal life. He begins with a nucleus out of the old. A dividing work takes place.

I did not read all that the Jews said because I wanted to keep it until now: "There arose a division again among the Jews because of these words. And many of them said, He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him? Others said, These are not the sayings of one possessed with a devil. Can a devil open the eyes of the blind?"

Evidently the Lord Jesus is getting some other sheep. There are those out of the old flock who are inclined toward Him. They are the new beginning, the new Israel, and He says: 'I will lead them out, right out of that whole setting'.

And we see that nucleus on the Day of Pentecost, beginning with twelve - then one hundred and twenty - then more than five hundred brethren at once - then three thousand - and then five thousand. There is the new flock.

Well, here is Jesus building upon the Old Testament principle. If He cannot take the Old Testament sheep, He will take up the principle of shepherd and sheep and will carry it over into His new Israel of this dispensation.

The position is quite clear, is it not? You have it there quite plainly. One Israel is being put aside and another Israel is being put in its place. The earthly is going, the heavenly is coming in to take its place, and this heavenly Israel becomes the new flock under the Shepherd.

We have to note some of the marks of these true sheep. Jesus says in this chapter: "I know mine own", and there are certain marks by which He knows His own sheep. If you have any doubt as to whether you are one of the Lord's sheep, you can prove it, and the Lord Himself knows by these marks.

You know, shepherds put a mark on their own sheep. It may be a red mark, or a blue one, but on their sheep they put their own mark. Jesus is saying here: 'I know My sheep because there are marks on them.' What are these marks?

The first one is this: "My sheep hear my voice".

You know, this is an illustration of a great truth. The Gospels are but illustrations of great truths. If you go on into the rest of the New Testament you will read a great deal about spiritual intelligence and about spiritual understanding, and about having 'an ear to hear what the Spirit saith'. You have that seven times at the beginning of the Book of the Revelation - "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith" (Revelation 2:7, etc.). Of course, that is not our outward ear. The Lord's sheep have an inward ear given to them, that is, a faculty of spiritual intelligence and an ability to hear what no one else can hear. It was to that that the Lord was referring - 'My sheep know when I speak. They have an ear for Me and are always listening for My voice. They hear My voice.'

Every truly born again child of God is given this faculty of spiritual hearing. That is why, in the early days of your Christian life, you say: 'The Lord seems to be saying something to me. He seems to be saying that I ought not to talk as I do, that I ought not to dress as I have been dressing, and that I ought not to go to the places to which I used to go, and many other things like that.' The Lord seems to be saying something to us. He is speaking in the heart, and as we go on in the Christian life that becomes the governing thing in our lives. We seek to hear what the Lord has to say to us, and when we hear His voice a crisis arises. Are we going back to the way of the old Israel? Or are we going to hear that voice and obey?

That is the message of the Letter to the Hebrews: 'Do not go back on to that old ground. Today if ye shall HEAR HIS VOICE, harden not your hearts as the old Israel did.' It is a very wonderful thing to see people who are obeying His voice! Other people do not have to tell them these things. They are a poor kind of Christian who have to be told all the time what they should do and what they should not do. The true sheep hear His voice and they follow Him. It is something that comes out of the heart - they have heard Him speaking in the heart.

This, of course, is the whole of that New Testament subject of spiritual understanding, and you and I, as Christians, are supposed to have that faculty.

We were speaking earlier about Nicodemus. He was a ruler of the Jews and a great man in Israel. He had a high position and a great education, and yet he had not the first idea of spiritual things. Jesus had to say to him: "If I told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3:12). Nicodemus could not see beyond the natural to the spiritual. When Jesus said 'You must be born again', he could not see beyond the natural, and said: "How can a man be born when he is old?" (John 3:4). He had no spiritual intelligence. He was like a little child, although a great teacher in Israel.

I have a little grand-daughter about four years of age. She went to Sunday School and when she came home she said to her mother: 'Mother, will you get out for me all my baby toys which we put away?' Her mother said: 'Why do you want your baby toys out again?' 'Oh,' she said, 'my teacher says I must be born again!'

Well, that is a little child and you might expect that of her, but here is the great big grown-up Nicodemus and he is no better than that! You might expect more of him, but you do not get it. Spiritual intelligence belongs to the born again ones, and we are given that gift with our new birth. We have a whole new set of

faculties, to hear, to see, to feel, and so on. And I repeat that it is about that very thing that the New Testament speaks when spiritual understanding is mentioned. That is what Jesus meant when He said: "My sheep hear my voice".

The next mark of these sheep is: "My sheep... follow me."

Those words are simple, but they have a very deep meaning. They mean that His sheep never have to be driven, never have to be compelled to go His way. His sheep follow Him in a voluntary, spontaneous way. The Lord never has to say (or ought never to have to say) to His sheep: 'You MUST go this way.' The Lord is going a certain way and His sheep see which way He is going and follow Him.

Of course, in the western world, it is just the other way round where sheep are concerned. Sheep have to be driven, but it is not like that in the East, and Jesus takes the principle of government from the East. He says: 'I don't drive My sheep. I never have to get behind them and force them to go on. I never have to send a dog after them to get them going. My sheep hear My voice and they follow Me.' It is a spontaneous movement of the heart to go after the Lord.

Let us apply the law. These are the marks of the Lord's sheep. Are you one of His sheep? Do you really hear Him speaking in your heart? Do you listen for His voice? Do you seek to have your life guided by that voice of the Spirit within speaking to you through the Word of God, through the circumstances of your life, through your sorrows? The Lord always has something to say to us. There are very few things which happen to the Lord's sheep which do not have some meaning. It is for us to seek to know what it is the Lord is saying to us. The government of the life of the Lord's sheep is by hearing His voice. Do you know anything about that? And what about this spontaneous response to the Lord? Is yours a heart that readily goes after the Lord? Is it one that has only to know that the Lord wants something and it responds with a hearty 'Yes, Lord'?

What is the bond between us, the Lord's sheep, and Him, the Shepherd? It is the same bond that existed between the old Israel, with whom the Lord had so much difficulty, and the Lord. This same principle of His ownership is taken over. That which unites us with the Lord is the realization that we belong to Him, that He is absolute owner of our lives. To quote another Scripture: "Ye are not your own; for ye were bought with a price" (I Corinthians 6:19,20), and we have the mark of the Lord put upon us, which is the seal of His ownership. Paul tells us that the seal is the Holy Spirit - "Ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 1:13). When you look at a seal you know to whom the object belongs. It says: 'This is the property of a certain person.' The Lord gives us His Spirit as the seal that we belong to Him.

What a sheep the Apostle Paul was! He said: "Let no man trouble me (that is, try to draw me away): for I bear branded on my body the marks of Jesus" (Galatians 6:17) ... 'The marks of Jesus mean that I belong to Him.' He said on the ship when he was travelling to Rome: "There stood by me this night an angel of the God whose I am, whom also I serve" (Acts 27:23). The true sheep of the Lord Jesus are never ashamed to say: 'I belong to the Lord Jesus. He owns my life and everything that I have. I am completely committed to Him.' That is a true sheep!

Well, these are the marks of the Lord's new Israel. And you can now understand why we have these words which have been the key to our meditation: "Wherefore, holy brethren, companions of a heavenly calling... companions of Christ" (Hebrews 3:1,14). There is a kind of companionship between this Shepherd and His sheep. They are not just animals, they are friends. There is a wonderful friendship between the Lord Jesus and His own - "Companions of a heavenly calling".

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