

*The Confessions of a*  
**“Would-Be”**  
*Shepherd*

by Mark Webb

**I** am still not sure what prompted my father to do it. Maybe he was bored. Maybe he wanted to be different. Maybe he just got tired of staring at a pasture overgrown with cockleburs and Johnson grass. Whatever it was, I'll never forget the day when I came home from school—I was eleven or so at the time—to learn that my father had purchased about twenty-five head of sheep. My excitement at the time prevented me from fully appreciating the recklessness of my father's action. For, you see, none of us knew the first thing about raising sheep. After all, this was Texas—Cattle country. Except of a few old ewes here and there, we had the only flock of consequence for miles around. But, for better or for worse, I was now in the sheep business. Those sheep would become my major source of income over the next few years. I made plenty of mistakes, especially that first winter. But the lessons I learned in caring for those sheep have proven absolutely invaluable to me in succeeding years. For, as I now know, there is a very close relationship existing between what I was doing then and what I am doing now.

## *Pastors and Pastures*

Our word "*pastor*" comes from an agricultural setting. It refers to one who tends, feeds, or, in general, cares for a flock of sheep. As a verb it refers to the act of such tending. It is a "*pastoral*" term, referring to the kind of work performed out in the pasture. In my case, my "*pastoral*" training came straight from the pasture, not from the seminary. I've often thought that seminaries would be wise to have a pasture out back, complete with a flock of sheep, to be used as one's "*lab*" work in conjunction with a course in "*Pastoral Theology*". Too often the ministry is viewed by those who aspire to it as a road to a lofty position or a "*cushy*" job. A stint out in the pasture would tend to sober one up to the realities of the work that lies ahead. It would provide an ideal testing ground to determine whether or not the Lord has indeed equipped the person in question with the character needed for such work. The work of a shepherd, as well as the work of a pastor, requires constant diligence and faithfulness to the task at hand, a readiness to stoop to menial, distasteful, servile tasks, and an incredible amount of patience to deal with the peculiarities, vagaries, and stubbornness of the sheep they serve. Should one prove unfitted for such "*ministry*" to a flock of sheep out in the pasture, they most likely will prove unsuited for the work of the ministry in the church. Many of the same gifts and character traits are required in both areas.

A stint in the pasture will not only prove one's character, but will improve one's theology at the same time! Our Lord borrowed many of His illustrations from the realm of agriculture, and often these related to sheep. I find that my early experience raising sheep has given me an understanding of and an appreciation for these passages. So, if you'll pardon the personal references, I would like to share with you some of my experiences with sheep.

## *He Calleth His Own Sheep by Name*

To me at that age, sheep were more like pets than livestock. Rather than thinking about how to make money with them, I was far more concerned with such things as trying to get them to eat out of my hand and come when I called them. But how can you expect sheep to come if they don't have names? So one of my first self-assigned tasks was to name each of my sheep. Usually I would pick names based on some obvious physical characteristic, such as “*White-face*”, “*Black-face*”, “*Brownie*” or “*Horns*” (Ok, so I wasn't too original!). Then there was “*Half-horns*”, with horns that were quite visible, just not very long. Then there was “*Skittish*”, who never ever learned to trust me or let me get near her (She kept having twins or triplets every year, however, so I couldn't bear to get rid of her). Before long these names became part of our household vocabulary. My mom could greet me at the door saying “*Horns jumped over the fence again today*”, and I would know immediately to which ewe she was referring. Even today, some thirty-five years later, I can still picture “*Horns*” in my mind! Should you have smuggled an extra sheep into my flock, attempting to pass it off as one of mine, I would have known instantly that it didn't belong to me. You might as well try to pass off someone else's child as mine—for I knew my sheep and their names back then as well as I know my own children and their names today.

It is with special relish that I read John 10. There Christ speaks of Himself under the figure of a shepherd and of His people as His sheep. Of special interest is verse 3: “*To Him the porter openeth, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out.*” A flock, in our eyes, may appear as a faceless, nameless mass of sheep. But, to the shepherd, each sheep is an individual personality and bears an assigned name. Christ would have us know that He has a deep, personal acquaintance with and an intimate knowledge of each one of His elect sheep. A shepherd may like sheep in general, but it is those sheep that are “*his own*” who enjoy the special

care, provision, and presence of the shepherd. So it is in the case of Christ and His people. It is these who are *"his own"* that He loves unto the end and for whom He lays down His life.

Christ knows His sheep long before they know Him. One day, as Christ was passing through Jericho, He pauses under a sycamore tree, looks up, and calls a man by name that He apparently has never seen before: *"Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house."* Indeed, just a short while afterwards, Zacchaeus proves to be one of Christ's sheep! Paul, in Gal. 4:9, refers to the conversion of the Galatian saints by these words: *"But now, after ye have known God."* Truly, eternal life is found in coming to a saving knowledge of God through His Son, Jesus Christ (See John 17:3). However, Paul seems to pause here for a moment. For stating it in that manner might imply to some that we come to such a knowledge of our initiative and volition. So, lest there be any ambiguity at this point, Paul hurriedly adds, *"or rather are known by God"*. That's the key! Yes, the sheep, in time, will each be brought to the knowledge of their Shepherd (See John 10:14). Yet His knowledge precedes theirs. We **love** Him because He first loved us, and we **know** Him because He first knew us!

Many seem to think that judgment day will require an involved amount of intense scrutiny by Christ in determining who belongs to Him. I'm convinced that this will hardly be the case. As quickly as Christ declares to some, in spite of their protests, *"I know you not"*,

He will instantly recognize His beloved sheep and call them by name. Friend, are you one of His? What evidence do you have that He will claim you as His own in that day? Have you heard His voice, and are you following Him? That's what His sheep do. If not, no matter how zealous and active you may be in religious activity, take heed lest you be excluded in that day. But to you sheep out there, living in the midst of wolves, struggling onward in the steps of your Shepherd, take heart! For the voice of your Shepherd calls: *"Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."*

## Fainting Sheep

*“But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd”—Matt. 9:36.*

Here we have the words of our Lord as He beholds the multitudes who have followed Him out of the cities and villages of Galilee. He has been sent into this world as the Good Shepherd, and has been given a flock of sheep by His Father (John 10:27-29). His sheep, however, are **lost** sheep. They are scattered, as if by a marauding wolf. They must be brought together into one fold and placed under the care of the shepherd to whom they belong (John 10:16). But there is a problem: According to the text, they have *“fainted”*. I have often smiled to myself while reading what the commentators have to say about this rather strange statement. They may know Greek, but they don’t know sheep!

### *The Wolf Dog*

Our little flock of sheep soon became quite a curiosity piece in our neck of the woods. Most folks thereabouts had little or no acquaintance with sheep. One day I looked down the gravel road leading to our farm, and there came Steve Caldwell. Steve lived a couple of miles away on another farm. He was about my age and we often visited back and forth. But what caught my attention that day was that Steve had brought along his dog, *“Wolf”*! Well, he wasn’t really a wolf, but that’s what we called him. Steve said he was part German Shepherd and part wolf, and just one look at him would convince you it was true! Just about the time I looked up and saw them coming, that wolf/dog caught sight of my sheep, and the race was on!

What happened next can best be described as our version of a Chinese fire drill! The sheep quickly banded together as tightly as possible and were running as fast as they could go. The dog was chasing them round and round the pasture,

barking and snipping at their hind ends. Steve was chasing his dog and screaming at the top of his lungs. I was running in about ten directions at once, trying to figure out how to save my sheep, on the one hand, and how to tell my dad that Wolf had killed and eaten them all, on the other. To my horror, I saw one of the sheep in front of Wolf suddenly just fall over. And then another one did the same. And another. *“He’s going to kill them all”*, I thought to myself, while pondering the fact that some of the sheep that had fallen weren’t even anywhere close to the dog!

Finally we hit upon a scheme that saved the day. I ran to the barn, opened the door, and the next time the flock came round the pasture, Steve and I managed to guide them into the barn and slam the door. Wolf was still running around the barn, looking for a way to get in, but Steve finally caught him and, mercifully, it was over. Over, except for the fact that about five or six of my ewes were still lying motionless on the ground, scattered about the pasture.

I walked over to where the first ewe was lying, consoling myself that losing only five or six sheep really wasn’t all that bad under the circumstances, when I noticed that the ewe wasn’t dead at all! There was no blood, no wound, not even a scratch on her. Her eyes were wide with fear, her legs were seemingly paralyzed, but she was still breathing. Steve came over and gave me a hand in rolling her back over on her stomach. After a few minutes, she began to move around, stood up, and was back to her ol’ self. One by one, we went to each of those ewes, and after a little work, they each recovered. I could hardly believe it—I hadn’t lost a single ewe to the *“wolf”* attack!

### *Calling the Sheep*

That was my first experience with a quality that is characteristic of sheep. When all seems lost and hopeless, they simply give up, surrender, and keel over. Now before you berate them too heavily for being such *“wimpy”* animals, remember

that if it weren't for that quality sheep would be nearly impossible to shear! Yet it can be a deadly quality as well. I've known sheep to roll over on their backs in a shallow depression, and simply lie there and die, because they assume they can't get up!

I suggest that this was what Christ saw as He surveyed the multitudes that day. As happened on several occasions in Christ's life, the immediate scene before Him, surveyed with the physical eye, reminded Him of spiritual realities existing on a far greater scale. The *“harvest”* to which He alludes in the following verse is surely greater in extent than just the multitude accompanying Him on that particular day. This is seen by what follows. The need, says Jesus, is for laborers to go and gather the harvest. To that end, Christ sends out His disciples throughout all the land of Israel in the next chapter. It's significant, in light of His previous statement concerning the multitude being like scattered, fainting sheep, that they are directed to the *“lost sheep of the house of Israel”* (Matt. 10:6). That's the point—His sheep are out there, but they are scattered and they have fainted. They will not come to Him in that condition. They must be sought out, found, and brought.

This is the work for which Christ commissioned His disciples, and the work to which all who are in the Gospel ministry today are called. We seek out those lost, fallen, fainting sheep. To all appearances, they are dead, even as others. But lo and behold, as we begin to proclaim the glad tidings of salvation, they hear a voice—the voice of their Shepherd (Cp. Eph. 2:17; 4:20-21). And they begin to stir, to sit up, and to stand. They arise and go to their Shepherd as if drawn by a magnet. And He, as I that day long ago, will not lose a single one of them (John 6:39)!

## Leading Sheep

The first few weeks with my new sheep were very disappointing. As a boy, I thought of them more as pets than as livestock—but what good is a pet if it won't let you come near it? My sheep were as wild as the wind! Apparently they had originated from one of the large sheep-ranch operations out in West Texas where human contact was minimal. Whatever the case, it was clear that they were terribly frightened by my presence. I had the romantic, Biblical image of a shepherd leading his flock over the hills from pasture to pasture, but the reality I was facing was quite otherwise. Whenever I entered the pasture, the sheep would invariably take off for the opposite end.

The obvious course of action was to try to attract them with feed. As fall progressed, the grass supply began to dwindle, so we stocked up on grain to use as feed during the coming winter. This afforded me with the "bait" to use in winning over their confidence. Yet after failing miserably at this for several weeks, I was about ready to give up when a breakthrough occurred. As I held out a handful of grain to a group of sheep for the umpteenth time, out of the blue, one of them walked over and starting eating right out of my hand. I was elated! Finally I had won over at least one of my sheep. Well, to be honest, I must inform you that this particular ewe had wool, not only all over her body, but all over her face as well. As her wool grew, her sight dwindled, and by winter she was as blind as a bat! So I'm not sure if it was my charismatic presence, or simply the scent of the grain, that finally won her over. At any rate, it was all downhill from there. Sheep, like humans, are intensely jealous of each other. They're obsessed with the notion that another of the flock might get one extra blade of grass or mouthful of grain before they do. So as soon as this one ewe began to receive grain from my hand, others soon followed.

As winter approached, my daily chores included giving my sheep a five-gallon bucket full of grain every morning and evening. Any remaining hesitancy towards me soon disappeared



when they realized that I was going to provide their sole food supply through the winter months ahead. My problem now was not their recalcitrance in coming to me, but avoiding being trampled as they stampeded me at the feed trough!

After that first winter, my relationship with my sheep was forever altered. Whenever I entered the pasture, they would come running from all directions and follow me wherever I went. My mother still recalls my sheep waiting for me down at the far end of the pasture where I exited the school bus in the afternoons. They would then follow along just inside the fence line as I walked down the road leading to our home. Finally, my dream of being a shepherd leading his flock was realized!

### *Spiritual Shepherds*

What’s the lesson here? We who are pastors are called to the office of tending, caring for, and feeding the flock of Jesus Christ. We are called to be leaders of the flock. But how do we get people to follow our leadership? Do we brow-beat them into submission? Do we stand over them with a rod threatening them? Do we drive them where we want them to go with a whip? Do we lay a guilt-trip on Christ’s sheep to get them to respond? These motivations are often resorted to in the church today, often under the guise of caring for the flock, and often with disastrous results.

We must never forget that though we are leaders, we are not lords of the flock (I Pet. 5:3). Authority, in the church, is not **inherent** in the office which a man holds, but is **derived** from the service that he renders (Matt. 20:25-28). What is that service? *“Feed the flock of God”*, says Peter (I Pet. 5:2). *“Feed the church of God”*, says Paul (Acts 20:28). What feed do we use? In Heb. 13, those who were to rule over the church and be obeyed, were those *“who have spoken unto you the word of God”*. God’s word is the food which the sheep of Christ need and crave.

I’m convinced that we who are called to lead Christ’s sheep in the church must employ the same tactics I did with my sheep long ago—by concentrating on their feeding. I’ve had the great privilege of knowing many pastors through the years, both in and out of the pulpit. The better I’ve gotten to know them, the more I’ve realized that pastors have the same problems, faults, and failings as anyone else. Often I’ve wondered how any of us are able to lead at all, given our warts, blemishes, and imperfections. But then I’ve seen those same men expositing God’s Word to His people, and the mystery is solved! They win the respect, love, and following of their people by faithfully proclaiming the Word of God and reflecting that Word in their lives.

We should not be surprised that all men do not respond to such a ministry. I never found that dogs or wolves had much use for the grain or hay my sheep so craved. Likewise, the world has no use for either the food we set before Christ’s sheep, or the one doing the feeding. But sheep of both sorts need food, hungering for that which is agreeable to their nature. Feed them, and they will surely follow.

## Lost Sheep

*“Leave them alone and they’ll come home  
Wagging their tails behind them.”*

—LITTLE BO PEEP

*“For the son of man is come to seek  
and to save that which was lost.”*

—JESUS CHRIST

I don’t know who Little Bo Peep was, but I do know this: She didn’t know much about sheep! The idea that lost sheep, left to themselves, will somehow seek and find their way back to the fold is a pipe dream with no basis in reality—held only by romantics and Arminians!

My sheep lived their lives by the premise, “*The grass is greener on the other side of the fence.*”

No matter how luscious the foliage might have been within the confines of the pasture, that outside was, by definition, inherently better. They showed great ingenuity when it came to getting out of the pasture. They would go over, under, around, and, sometimes, through, a fence. If there was the slightest break or weakness in the fence line, or the smallest opening underneath where a sheep might wiggle through, one of them was sure to discover it and make their break for freedom, with the others quickly following suit.

Once outside, they would scatter in all directions, merrily skipping their way across the open fields, inevitably heading for the railroad right-of-way at the far end of the pasture, or for the highway just beyond. They clearly were having the time of their lives, blissfully unaware of the danger to which they had exposed themselves—from dog packs, coyotes, on-rushing trains, or the traffic on the highway.

To be frank, getting back inside the pasture was the furthest thing from their minds. And to further complicate things, once outside, they were all immediately smitten with a bout of amnesia—losing all recollection of where that exit point in the fence had been. Why, they could have wandered around until Doomsday and never found their way back, Little Bo Peep notwithstanding! Inevitably, I’d have to round them up and drive them around to an open gate. My sheep were expert at getting **out** of the pasture, but dumber than dirt when it came to getting back **in**!

Now if you’ve ever observed this waywardness that’s characteristic of sheep, you’ll understand why our Lord chose that particular animal to represent His elect. “*All we like sheep have gone astray*”, says the prophet. Observe how sheep go astray and you’ll get a good portrait of how sin operates. Though we most often think of and define “*sin*” in terms of its literal meaning—falling short of or missing a goal—sin is also set forth in scripture in terms of a “*transgression*”—the stepping

over of a boundary or trespassing on forbidden territory. It's this waywardness which sheep so clearly portray. Though sinful man may be contained somewhat by the restraints which God places around him, he, nevertheless, spends his days desiring what is forbidden—often, not because it's desirable, but simply because it's forbidden! Should the restraint be relaxed, he quickly makes a break for forbidden pastures. Having escaped those “*unreasonable*” boundaries which God had erected, he now imagines he is finally free to seek his own way and really live, unaware that danger lurks all around him and that misery lies dead ahead. Having once escaped God's pasture, he, like my sheep, is unable to find his way back. He is quite capable of going astray to the full extent that God allows it, and to do so all by himself, but he's totally helpless to return.

### *Seeking the Lost*

Our Lord wonderfully illustrates this in the trilogy dealing with a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son found in Luke 15. In the first section, though ninety-nine sheep are in the fold, one is lost in the wilderness. The shepherd does not employ the “*Little Bo Peep method*”, neither does he simply call for His sheep to come home while standing at the gate of the fold. No, he leaves the ninety and nine in the fold, and at great cost and trouble to himself, seeks the lost sheep until he finds it, carrying it back to the fold on His shoulders. What a marvelous picture of sovereign grace in action! Here is salvation, observed from the viewpoint of heaven—and from that viewpoint, all that's seen, all that's important, is the saving work of the shepherd.

The following section, wherein a woman seeks her lost coin, is, of course, quite similar. But the third section, dealing with a lost son, is strikingly different. For here, you see, the storyline follows the actions of the object that's lost, not the actions of the one who finds that which is lost. It's the very same story as the lost sheep, but this time it's told from the sheep's viewpoint. Observe this young son, feeling restrained

and constrained by the “*fence*” of his father’s authority, gazing out upon forbidden pastures. Finally, the restraint is lifted and he is granted his heart’s desire. Free from his father’s rule, he sets sail for those greener pastures. Once there, however, his pleasure is short lived, and he soon finds himself a slave to a miserable existence. It is here that repentance takes place. A reversal takes place in his thinking, as he comes to view the world he’s in as the death-camp it truly is, and looks longingly upon his father’s home as a blessed place. Having that new mindset, he sets out for home, pleading nothing but mercy, and is graciously received by his loving father.

Were it not for the two preceding sections of the story, we might draw the erroneous conclusion that, in the case of real people, salvation is totally the result of an act of man’s will. But, remember, what you’re seeing here is the same story simply told from another vantage point. How do we know this? The key that unlocks the parable is found in the father’s words, “*This, my son, was dead, and is alive again. He was lost and is found.*” “*Found?*” That’s precisely the element that appears to be missing in this section! Who “*found*” Him? We don’t see anyone find the son, do we? Yet that’s what the father declares is the reality, and is what ties this story to the two preceding ones. Consider: What do we actually see happening when men repent today and come to Christ? Do we actually see the Spirit’s work of conviction, drawing, or regeneration? No, we see behavior strikingly similar to that which this son exhibited. We don’t actually see a Savior seeking, finding, and carrying His lost sheep back to the fold. But just because you can’t see it, don’t ever assume that it hasn’t happened on the spiritual plane.

### *Giving God Glory*

One night our family returned home in the middle of a cold, winter’s rainstorm. I put on an overcoat, boots, and so forth, and set out to put up my sheep. With the weather so miserable, they were near the barn and immediately went inside

with very little coaxing from me. But, to my dismay, as I counted them, one was missing. One ewe was lost. I set out for the far end of the pasture, and, sure enough, there she was, lost and weak, on the verge of succumbing to the cold. I was not quite as gracious as the shepherd in the parable. I prodded and kicked her down the length of the pasture and across the creek until I got her safely within the barn. I had saved her from sure and certain death! But did she fall at my feet in appreciation, gazing up at me with grateful, adoring eyes? No! She simply walks to the back of the barn, lies down, and looks up at me with an expression that said *“Big deal! So what?”*

Do you see? As lost sheep have no capacity of understanding their danger, they are likewise incapable of gratitude or praise for their deliverance. They’re just dumb animals. But you and I are not animals—we have the capacity to understand the depth of our lostness as well as the greatness of our deliverance. If it is God’s purpose, which it is, that we should be to the praise and glory of His grace, doesn’t it follow that He will make certain that we understand our danger, our helplessness, our misery, so that we might rightly evaluate the greatness of our deliverance? How then, does our Shepherd *“carry”* us to His fold? Not by physically dragging us, kicking and screaming, but by opening our eyes to His truth so that we freely choose to return to the fold, just as the lost son did. Only then will we be qualified to render to God the praise, adoration, and thankfulness for the salvation He so freely gives us in Christ Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep!

## Conclusion

By the time I left home for college, my folks had taken over the sheep chores. They kept them for a few more years before selling them, thus ending my encounters with sheep. Well, almost.

In the spring of 1972, my wife Linda and I moved west to Evanston, Wyoming, where I would pastor for the next ten

years. For about half of that time we lived out on a ranch about eight miles from town. Though cattle was the main stay of this particular ranch, many others around us raised sheep. No, not a few dozen sheep like I had raised in Texas, but, in some cases, several thousand head of sheep!

Most sheep in Wyoming aren't kept permanently inside the confines of a pasture. Instead, they spend much of the year grazing out on the open range. Now this is wild country—wide open spaces, and full of critters hostile to sheep. Since you can't just go and turn sheep loose in country like that, the sheep rancher generally employs a shepherd to take care of them. These herders go out on the prairie and literally live with the sheep, day-in and day-out. It's a terribly boring and lonely existence, and I suspect that most of us would go crazy as a loon in short order doing it. But these men come from the Basque region of Spain where taking care of sheep in this fashion has been done for centuries and runs, quite literally, in the blood.

Often we'd be out bouncing across the plains hunting Antelope—or whatever other excuse we could come up with to do so—and we'd suddenly come upon a huge flock of sheep. He might not be immediately evident, but look around, and sure enough, you'd eventually spot the shepherd sitting up on some high point, watching over the flock. Nearby you'd see his wagon—which looked a lot like an old Conestoga wagon, except that the cover was made of tin, not canvas, and had a stove pipe sticking up through it. He'd have his horse and a couple of dogs for company, but, outside of the sheep, that was it! Except for an occasional visit by the sheep's owner to keep him re-supplied, or a chance encounter with someone like us out roaming around, he lived a life devoid of human contact.

Raising sheep this way resembles in many respects the way it was done long ago in Palestine. Further, it sheds much light upon the relationship between Christ, the great Shepherd, and His people, His sheep.

### *Lowly Duty*

Being a shepherd was not exactly the most glamorous of jobs. The fact that David, the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, was out watching the sheep the day Samuel came to town, speaks volumes. I suspect that each of Jesse's sons had taken their turn at that duty while growing up, handing the job down to the next younger brother as soon as they could. Now David is the "*low man on the totem pole*" and this duty falls to him. Anything, literally, anything would have been a better, more exciting, more challenging job. Simply put, this was not what you aspired to be when you were growing up. Anyone could do this job if they just would.

Now consider these things in the light of Christ's relationship to us. If herding sheep is, in our eyes, a low, mean, despicable, and base occupation for a man to perform, how much more lowliness is demanded for this One Who is God to embrace our nature and become the Shepherd of those given Him by His Father? Surely the nature of God is far higher than ours, than is our nature above that of sheep! Yet the Son of God humbled Himself to become our Shepherd and our servant, and to actually partake of our nature. What amazing condescension!

### *Dangerous Duty*

The shepherd is a sheep's only protection. During my last summer in Wyoming, I took a group of friends backpacking up in the Wind River Range. We set up camp in a beautiful meadow on one side of a stream which meandered through it, while a shepherd and several hundred head of sheep occupied the other side. During the day, while we were out fishing, he would be sitting up on the side of the mountain overlooking the valley, rifle in hand, guarding the flock. Woe be to the coyote who wandered into that valley thinking he was going to get an easy meal! Towards evening, he would let out a yell, and sheep would come streaming out of every nook and cranny to gather around his camp. There they would bed



down and spend the night, surrounding the herder’s tent. One night I awakened about 2 a.m., and off in the distance I could hear the coyotes barking. I wondered to myself what sheep think of when they awaken to such sounds. For if there’s one thing sheep are better at than being dumb, it’s being helpless! But then another thought crossed my mind. I supposed that they don’t worry too much—for they know that right over there is the shepherd! That’s the point. Sheep are absolutely defenseless in themselves. Their sole defense lies in their proximity to their shepherd. Is our situation all that different? Christ describes our situation as *“sheep in the midst of wolves.”* There is a Devil who, like a roaring lion, goes about seeking to devour us. In that circumstance, the wise thing to do is to stick as close as possible to the shepherd. At least, to some shepherds.

It’s relatively easy to dispatch a coyote at long range with a high-powered rifle. But in earlier days, when predators came in larger sizes and one’s weapons were only staves and rods, it involved dangerous, hand-to-hand combat! Now I wonder: From a sheep’s perspective, what makes a shepherd a *“good”* shepherd? Well, I suppose, one who doesn’t flee when danger comes, sacrificing your life to spare his own. David was such a *“good”* shepherd. When the bear and the lion snatched lambs from his flock, he freed the lambs and slew the predators with his bare hands. He was a *“good”* shepherd! Yet all of this pales before the specter of David’s greater son. For there arose a much greater danger to His flock than that of a wild animal. Sin threatened to destroy them, and that for all eternity. Rather than abandon His flock, He faced the danger, laying down His own life so that His sheep might have life. Now I’d call Him a *“good”* shepherd. No, I’d call Him *“the”* Good Shepherd!

### *Important Duty*

A shepherd, in the kind of environment I’ve described, is not only the sheep’s protector, but their guide as well. In our part of Wyoming, sheep might range well over a hundred miles

in a season. They would leave their winter pastures in the spring, head out over the *"sheep lanes"*, and spend the summer grazing in the high country. As the autumn snows begin to fall, they head back down to lower elevations, eventually arriving back at their starting point. It's the herder's job to guide the flock to and fro. He must know where the grass is, as well as the watering points along the way. He's the one who knows when to move on and when to stay. When they move from place to place, he doesn't hand the sheep a road map and say *"meet ya' over there!"* Rather, his personal presence is what guides the sheep. It's not necessary for the sheep to know either their destination or the route to it. All they need to do is stay close by the shepherd. They may not know the way, but they know him who is *"the way"*.

Sound familiar? It ought to! I'm convinced that this is the way Christ guides His people. This may well explain the difficulty that so many of us seem to have in discerning His hand of guidance. We may be looking for the wrong thing! We are accustomed in life to knowing the entire route to our intended destination before ever striking out for it. But in the Christian life, it just doesn't work that way. Christ's guidance is much more personal and intimate than that. It is done on a *"need to know"* basis. It often entails only knowing the next step to take—and often knowing that only when it's necessary to take it. Our duty is simply to keep our eyes upon our Shepherd and trust Him. He is both willing and able to place us where He would have us be. My confidence in discerning His guidance must never lie in my ability to follow, but in the ability of my Shepherd to lead. The *"good"* shepherd not only protects the flock, but guides the flock as well.

### *Postscript*

Owners of sheep exhibit a certain fascination with and attachment to those animals that I just don't sense with the owners of other types of livestock. I've had the opportunity to share my sheep stories and experiences in many situations and

circumstances over the past years. If anyone present has raised sheep, they immediately begin to smile and nod knowingly. There is a certain comradery that “*sheep people*” share with each other because of their shared experience.

As a Christian, I have an interest in those animals on an even more basic level. For it is no accident that God chose the most stupid, the most helpless and vulnerable of all livestock to represent us, His people! Nor is it any accident that God chose to represent the work of our Lord and Savior by that of a shepherd. To a “*sheep person*”, those expressions carry a wealth of meaning that simply cannot be derived from a theology book. I simply cannot read passages like “*The Lord is my shepherd*” or “*We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture*” without drawing from my well of visual images and past experiences. Hopefully, I’ve been able to pass along a few of these to you as well. May the Lord enable you to read the verses that follow with renewed insight:

*Savior, like a shepherd lead us,  
 much we need Thy tender care;  
 In Thy pleasant pastures feed us,  
 for our use Thy folds prepare:  
 Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus,  
 Thou hast bought us, Thine we are;  
 Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus,  
 Thou hast bought us, Thine we are.*

*We are Thine—do Thou befriend us,  
 be the Guardian of our way;  
 Keep Thy flock, from sin defend us,  
 seek us when we go astray:  
 Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus,  
 hear, O hear us when we pray;  
 Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus,  
 hear, O hear us when we pray.*

—ATTR. TO DOROTHY A. THRUPP, 1779-1847

