

“Life in the Pasture: The Sheep”  
Acts 20:17-38

FCF: Slow to see His care

**PROPOSITION:** (magnet) Because of the Lord’s shepherding care reflected in “pasture life,”  
(anchor) we should take comfort and follow His lead all the more.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

It is a good thing indeed when passing years bring growing maturity. How wise, how informed, how insightful, how kind and compassionate my parents now seem to be. So much more so than years ago. Of course, the question is, “Who is it that has grown more wise? Them or me?” You know the answer. The change has far more to do with me than with them. I’ve simply grown up enough to recognize things that were in them all along. Time has a way of tempering judgment. We often grow to see what is there.

Now I recognize not everyone here grew up with such parents. Perhaps some still have yet to see such things in their past because it was never there. But the fact is some of us don’t see the care of others when it is there – both interpersonally and with God. Circumstances, pain, pride, or some combination thereof blinds us. But His care is there. It can be seen. And often in surprising ways. Look with me at Acts 20.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** Acts 20:17-38

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

A headline from an article I read recently ([READ World, 10/30/04, p.30](#)), “*Citizen Soldiers: Enlisted men and women taking the bullets may decide the election with their ballots.*” This last presidential election campaign saw a great deal of interest in the military vote. For at least two reasons. First, because of the candidates themselves – a decorated war time veteran and a wartime president. Second, because of the anticipated closeness of the race. And so many eyes were upon those absentee ballots from overseas.

Of course, in the end, such attention wasn’t needed. Interesting thing, though, that came out of a few independent surveys. Within the armed services, supporters of President Bush outnumbered supporters of Senator Kerry by a 4 to 1 margin. 4 to 1. In interviews conducted, there was a hostility to the challenger and yet a clear loyalty to the president. Where does such loyalty come from? After all, wasn’t it this president who sent these folks into harm’s way? Hasn’t he kept them deployed, even extending tours? What explains this bond? There are too many factors to consider at this moment but in some ways it goes back to Thanksgiving 2003. Many of you remember the news flashes. Air Force One landing in Baghdad. The President of the United States flying into hostile air space to dine with the soldiers on the ground. Here at home as we watched on television, one couldn’t help but be moved by such a gesture from the Commander-in-Chief. And the troops couldn’t help but be moved either. Good leaders inspire their people with their presence and their willingness to share the risks. In doing such things, they show their concern for their people and this brings out devotion from them.

Which brings us to our text for this morning. This is the third of three messages looking at this stirring address Paul gives to the elders from Ephesus as he makes his way back to Jerusalem. “Life in the Pasture” – we’ve looked at the calling of the shepherds, the reality and danger of the wolves, and now we need to consider what it means for us to be described as “sheep.” Sheep are the most frequently mentioned animal in the Bible – important to an agrarian and nomadic life and appropriately used in metaphors pointing towards greater spiritual realities – the helplessness and waywardness of sheep, their

dependence on shepherds for protection, grazing, watering, shelter and tending to injuries. In both the Old and New Testament, with references as early as Genesis, we see references to God's people as His sheep. Little wonder Paul taps into this stream of thought in this address. It is well established both for him and his hearers.

The questions then that press upon us become, with such images in mind, what do we learn about ourselves in this passage? Who we are? How God does regard us? What sort of concern has He shown for us? And what kind of devotion is due to Him from us?

### **I. OVERSEEN BY SHEPHERDS**

First, consider the fact that His flock is to be overseen by shepherds, elders such as these charged with a shepherding task (**READ Acts 20:28**). Now, I want you to think with me about some of the implications of these commands – unspoken assumptions.

#### *A) Needed*

If overseers are given to shepherd the flock, it means the flock needs oversight.

##### 1. Food

Sheep need green pasture, fresh water. They need someone to take them to it, to guide them, to show them what's there. And, apparently, so do we with the food and drink we find in God's Word, in the sacraments, in prayer, and growing in His grace.

##### 2. Protection

Sheep also need protection. They need someone to watch and guard over them, to be alert. And, again, apparently, so do we with warnings regarding false teaching.

#### *Illustration:*

Let me take you back to Psalm 23. We sang a song a few minutes ago based on its words. Have you ever taken the sentiments these words arouse and considered just how our Lord most often exercises such shepherding care? Is it not likely it could be through His under-shepherds – the elders, the overseers, He provides for His flock?

#### *B) Provided*

Which is the next thing implied here – not only that we as sheep stand in need of oversight but that this need has been met. And hardly in any haphazard way.

##### 1. Intentionality re. them

There is a clear intentionality here. In verse 28, where Paul refers to the church "*in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,*" there is an emphasis in the original Greek. We could almost translate it, "*you, you yourselves*" – meaning you as opposed to any others, you especially fitted, chosen, and placed. There's purpose in who is placed.

##### 2. Intentionality re. all

In fact, there is another sense of intentionality here as well – not just regarding the overseers but those overseen as well. The Holy Spirit has "*made*" them there. Again, the wording implying placement, setting, appointing. There is a divine matchmaking here.

#### *C) Commanded*

And with all that, there come these commands to be alert. This too implies some things – not just need and the way need is met but a prizing as well. Think with me.

##### 1. Regarding themselves

The overseers are commanded to "*pay careful attention*" – first to themselves and their own lives and doctrine. And why? So that they might be able to carry out their task.

##### 2. Regarding the flock

Their task of then paying careful attention to the flock – the feeding and the protecting task so essential to the shepherd's job description – is then able to be carried out.

Now why? All of this implies that the Chief Shepherd wants His flock well cared for.

*Illustration:*

Think with me. When parents of young ones go out for the evening and leave them in the care of a babysitter, what do they give as they go? Instructions, right? Not just where the frozen pizza and the hotdogs are, but when the children need to go to bed, what they can watch, and how to get a hold of help in case of an emergency. Now why? Why go to all that trouble? Because of how precious those children are to their parents. Because they want them well taken care of. And so clear instructions are given.

*Application:*

Do you see? God has given us clear instructions regarding who is to serve as His under-shepherds and what they are to do. The overseers of the church, the elders, are tokens of our Lord's love for us. They show us how dear we are to Him. And more than that, they are instrumental means of His love as well. They are the human face of His shepherding care. They are who He has provided and it is done with real intent in mind.

How then does one regard such under-shepherds? It reinforces the need to support them in prayer. It makes it all the more crucial to grant them something of what our Puritan forefathers used to call "charitable judgments" – thinking the best of others' intentions and motives. It also makes it all the more sensible to strive as the writer of Hebrews notes to make their labors for the flock a joy rather than a burden.

But our Lord's providing us such tokens and means of His care tells us some things about how we should regard Him as well. With gratitude. With wonder for knowing our needs so very well. With trust toward all our other needs. For if He would do this, how much more can He be relied on in so many other things as well?

## **II. OBTAINED BY GOD**

All the more so as we consider this second theme here in Paul's words regarding what it means to be described as sheep, as part of God's flock – that we have been "obtained." (READ Acts 20:28) These are stirring words. What do they mean?

### *A) Possessed*

The language is that of possession. That is to say, we are not our own.

#### 1. Associated with Him

Now certainly it involves our being associated with Him. We are "the church of God." We have been marked out from the rest of the world, set aside for His purposes.

#### 2. Owned by Him

But more than being associated with Him, we have been acquired by Him. It is His mark upon us – like a brand set upon livestock of other kinds, we are His. Now how so?

### *B) Purchased*

Through His having purchased us. This is certainly implied here and spelled out more clearly in other passages as well. We have been purchased. Or, to put it another way, using a word common to the culture of Paul's day, we have been "redeemed."

#### 1. A high price

The image is that of a slave market. We have been freed. But this freedom had a price. And what was it? Paul tells us it was God's own blood – a clear reference to the deity of Christ and to the graphic nature of His sacrifice. We have been freed at a high price.

#### 2. A paid price

And this high price is also a paid price. The verb Paul uses here is in the past tense – "which he obtained." This obtaining, this redemption, is something that happened in the

past but with abiding effects. It has already happened. The transaction has already taken place. We have nothing to add. It is already done (**READ Mark 10:45**).

*Illustration:*

I'm reminded of Abraham Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation" – said to be one of our nation's finest state documents. Its results were dramatic, changing the focus of the Civil War. It bolstered the morale and focused the energies of the Union Army. It made it difficult for foreign powers to offer assistance to the Confederacy. To do so was then to endorse slavery. But most important of all, the Emancipation Proclamation eventually conferred liberty on over 3.1 million slaves. 3.1 million. Think of it.

The long-awaited deliverance. Never again in this country would human beings find themselves at the mercy of a master. Never again would an owner be able to buy another human being, sell him, tell him how much he would work, where he would live, and what he could expect to receive for his efforts. Gone were the humiliating slave auctions, the enforced obstacles to education, and all the other ways in which slavery could strip a man of his pride and dignity. They had been set free.

And how? Not just through Lincoln's resolve but through the blood of the Union Army. That was the only way the words of the Emancipation Proclamation could ever become more than words and wishes. It would take the blood of others on a battlefield.

*Application:*

Now just as surely as the redemption purchased by our Lord is more full and free, so too was the price infinitely higher. You get the idea. And a response is called for.

As surely as emancipated slaves are to live as free, so too we are to live as His blood-bought sheep. It's who we are. Think with me. Whose are we? The sheep are not the shepherds'. We talked about that a few weeks ago. But nor are they their own. The sheep are the Lord's. We are the Lord's. We are His. We've been freed by Him to be His. Not free to run about as we please. The lives of sheep within this flock really should look different. Yet at the same time we are not free to be harassed – not left unshepherded. For again, His care is such that He has put a face to His care – the overseers, the shepherds providing the food, providing the protection we need.

Do you see how sweet His shepherding care is for us? Do you see the comfort we can take in that and the freedom we have to follow His lead all the more? If He loves us here in this, where else will His love not go? What else will His love not do? We simply cannot read such things and not come away yet more assured that He has His eyes set upon us and His ears tuned to our cry. Oh, His love for His own!

**CONCLUSION:**

Again, think back to the song we sang a few minutes ago, "The King of Love My Savior Is..." Let the very words wash over you. The Lord, our Shepherd, is our provider, guide, and protector. Listen again to the psalm from which this song comes (**READ Psalm 23:1-3**) Nothing I lack. In anything I can trust. He loves us despite our straying. He is ever with me. I am never alone. Oh, do you see the beauty in all this? We are but bleating sheep. And He is our dear Shepherd. We see it all through the life in the pasture – feeding us, warning us, and obtaining us. How can we not trust Him? What have we to fear? What need do we have to hold back? For the Lord is our Shepherd.

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