

God's Sheep

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God refers to his people as “sheep” and “the flock” repeatedly in His word. For those that have not had the “opportunity” (a choice word!) to work with sheep, God’s wisdom in choosing this animal to represent us may not be immediately obvious, but it *is* a perfect fit! Experiences from years of wintering domestic sheep near Bitter Creek (“crik”) in northwest Wyoming may help illustrate why.

Prior to winter-pasturing a flock of 3000 sheep, a fence had to be built to provide the flock with its boundaries (Num. 32:24). The fence was for the sheep’s well being and was, in essence, the law for the flock. It was not in their nature to try to knock the fence down; they seemed to understand their lack of power to do so. Their approach was more to look for tears in the fence (loopholes) or ways around the fence altogether. It was not unusual to see flocks just walking the fence-line looking for opportunities to get to “greener grass.” Sound familiar?

A sheep seems to operate on the “I’m a dummy so I’ll follow you” system. If the lamb next to him or ahead of him is moving, even slightly, then he is considered to be someone worth following. The result is that the whole flock can end up following itself in elliptical formations for long periods of time while not getting anywhere! This is true because they want to be led, not driven. Sheep won’t just follow sheep either. I’ve seen a tired Australian Blue Heeler with his tongue hanging out in exhaustion slowly turn and walk away from a standing flock only to turn and find the sheep following him! And you could usually lead an entire flock by grabbing any one of the lambs and forcing him to go where you wanted to take the whole bunch. It usually didn’t matter whether the lamb was bleating in distress or not (Jer. 11:19). We’ve also moved flocks by tying a goat behind a pickup and just slowly driving to the new pasture (Matt. 25:32-33; 1Cor. 15:33). And you’ve heard the term “black sheep.” There is some truth in this connotation. Shepherds usually kept an eye out for where the black-faced sheep of the flock were because they tended to be at the head of the straying flock a little more often than other sheep. Sheep will do almost anything that their leader will do. I’ve seen sheep be spooked into jumping out of a livestock semi-trailer, when the ramp was not in place, only to have another follow in his tracks. Sheep are always looking for someone to follow and they are easily influenced. Sound familiar?

At some time or another, the sheep eventually stray (Isa. 53:6) from the fold. Sometimes it appears that the sheep are doing nothing but walking the fence looking for holes. At other times, the transgression appears less organized. Sometimes this type of escape started all because of one lamb who was eating his way from one self-fulfilling morsel to the next, and without intentionally doing it, walked through a downed section of fence. Usually, others were not far behind him because of the “I’m a dummy so I’ll follow you” system. Once they finally realized they were out of the fold, and sometimes

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it took a while, they didn't hang around hoping someone would notice. They were "free," or so they thought, and started to wander further. They were oblivious to the increased danger from eagles, coyotes, cars, drainage ditches, and the like. Quite often, it was a neighbor some distance away that would call and report the lost lambs (Luke 15:4). It seems that even the "regular world" notices when a sheep is not where he is supposed to be. Sound familiar?

At times, the sheep got into trouble *inside* the fence. We experienced an occasional loss from coyotes and eagles coming inside the fence "not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29). In addition, we used to allow the sheep to freely access the waters of Bitter Creek anywhere along its bank. This was because we weren't the perfect shepherds that our God is. We took risks with our sheep that He does not take with His. Portions of the creek bank were soft and muddy like quicksand. A lamb's focus is only on his personal wants, namely food and water, and he is generally oblivious to the dangers in front of him unless they are very obvious. As a result, the lamb would not concern himself with possible consequences of his choices and he would soon find himself up to his belly in muck. A sheep's strength is very short-lived; in a matter of hours the trapped lamb was so tired that he could not even hold up his head. Death usually came by drowning. The sad thing was that if the other sheep still saw him as a leader they came right on in to join him at the water hole since it looked good to them, too. What they found was a death trap. (Prov. 4:14) Sound familiar?

Sheep are dependent on their master for food (1Sam. 17:15), but there were always a few who ate things they were not intended to. The intended food supply was sugar beet tops, but even when they were abundant, some would prefer pieces of the sugar beet root that had been left behind at harvest time. These were a coveted find for many of the sheep, it seemed. A prompt sugar-beet-removal procedure (not pretty) was required or the lamb died of asphyxiation. A sheep that is not eating what the shepherd has supplied him will eventually find himself in jeopardy. Sound familiar?

Sheep are extremely vulnerable. The sheep that we were pasturing had no defenses at all, save running away, but often they didn't know when to run (Ezek. 34:5). (At other times, all they did was run around because they were nervous about something that wasn't really a threat.) Once you grabbed one of the lambs and rolled it over on its back, his four legs just pointed skyward. Only the shepherd can rescue the lamb from problems that range from the "roaring lion" to the cockleburs that begin collecting in his woolen coat soon after his birth. His life is totally dependent on the protection of the shepherd, and he gets this aid by staying in the fold. Sound familiar?

Sheep tend to follow the paths of least resistance. During a major winter storm, the lambs will usually begin walking with the wind. This almost always results in some kind of problem. When the flock has walked with the wind until they've reached the fence, there is nowhere else for them to go. At least that is their impression. They begin their

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“follow the leader” procedure near the fence and it is only a matter of time until the fence will fail and they find themselves outside the fold. The fence break is not intentional, but it doesn't change the fact that they have left protected areas. At other times, following the wind leads the sheep to a location where there is indeed temporary rest from the storm. This is the case when the sheep found their way down into the Bitter Creek canyon where the wind was much less severe. The only problem was that hiding out in this zone of least resistance was deadly; the sheep didn't realize that the snow also collected here. Several times over the years when we checked the sheep after a major storm, it was with great concern that dad would realize the sheep count was low. We would run and get long steel rods to use as sounding poles in the snow. The idea was to run the rod down into the deep snow and try to feel the sheep. We usually found some, even if it took a couple of days. Many would already be dead, but others would be found alive. It was never pretty, though, because they were captive in a tiny igloo with all of their filth and odor trapped with them. We also had to be careful not to end up in the hole with them. (Gal. 6:1)

When sheep have had the opportunity to see their flock-mates going through some of the troubles we've discussed so far, you'd think they would learn something and avoid some of the same mistakes (Rom. 15:4)! Not so! Sound familiar?

There are many good things about sheep, too. Most are born pure white, innocent, and friendly. They are usually stay mild-mannered throughout their life, too; when it was time to shear a sheep, or give it an injection, the most the lamb did was bleat. There was never any spitting, kicking, or biting. When the shearers set a sheep back on its hindquarter for shearing, the sheep usually became very still and didn't make a sound. Even when the sheep-shearers got too close with the electric shears, and blood resulted, no lamb took revenge (Isa. 53:7). Sound familiar?

The sheep may not have realized it, but they benefited from their trials (Jas. 1:2-4). By going through the traumatizing shearing process, their vision and safety was improved, because the wool was removed from around the eyes. Shearing around the tail, or docking, also provided the solution for tail-flap freeze-overs that occasionally occurred during very cold weather (very “not pretty”). The injections, though painful, also provided the sheep with long term benefits. Sound familiar?

Sheep are a highly social animal; they like being around others of their kind. If they get isolated from others, they become very nervous. They feel lost without their flock and may bleat for hours on end in an attempt to locate the others. At other times, when the flock was all together, if some of the sheep began bleating, they seemed to all want to get in on the act (1Sam. 15:14); when some began to quiet down, they generally all began to quiet down. If one of their number sensed danger, his tension was noticed by the rest of the flock and they all got more alert and responsive. Sound familiar?

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Sheep that stay in the flock produce good things for their shepherds. The wool that is sheared and the lanolin that is collected is of high value (Job 31:20). The rate at which they produce these "fruits" is related to whether they stay secure in the fold and partake of the master's feed. Sound familiar?

What about the shepherds that have been mentioned? Sheep need them – they often don't know it, but it's true. The good shepherd keeps the fences in top condition to help the sheep stay at home. The good shepherd is someone who leads, not drives (1Pet. 5:3). The good shepherd goes the extra mile to bring the lost sheep back (Luke 15:4). The good shepherd feeds the flock (Acts 20:28). The good shepherd protects the flock in the fold (1Pet. 5:2). The good shepherd watches that the sheep don't follow the course of least resistance. The good shepherd reminds and warns the flock of those things that have been learned. The good shepherd helps the flock feel secure so that it can better produce its fruits. The good shepherd has closeness with the sheep (John 10:3). You will also find that shepherds like working with their sheep. Sound familiar?

Let's be the best sheep that we can be! And for those to whom it applies, the best shepherds, too!

BAAAAAAA!