

# Feed My Sheep

## The Lord Jesus' last talk with Peter: John 21:15-23

As we well know, during one sad night Peter disowned his Lord 3 times. He had earlier expressed his willingness to lay down his life for the Lord Jesus, but he had failed. Since then, every time he heard a cock crow he was reminded of that cold night, his fear, his betrayal, his failure. Could the Lord still use him? Then early one morning, on a beach by the Sea of Galilee, the Lord Jesus came looking for Peter. The Lord wanted to reinstate Peter and give him a ministry that would keep him useful and busy until he grew old. This is the setting of the last conversation between Jesus and Peter as recorded in John 21.

### 1. The Chief Shepherd has a flock

The first meeting between the Lord Jesus and Peter also took place by the Sea of Galilee. Peter was busy fishing with his brother Andrew when Jesus came walking along the beach towards them. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." The Lord Jesus had plans for Peter's life. Peter dropped his nets and followed Jesus (Matt. 4:18-20). In restoring Peter, the Lord Jesus made no reference to nets and fishing but to lambs, sheep, caring and feeding. The Lord had a new task for Peter, but before He would entrust Peter with it, some important points had to be made clear.

- (a) Lambs and sheep: The image of shepherds and a flock is well used in both the Old and the New testament. The sheep represent God's people, and there is much variety within a flock. If we are to be good shepherds of God's people, we must remember that there are younger and older believers, there are playful and slow saints, enthusiastic and reflexive, active ones and studious ones. We must learn to identify and appreciate diversity, and then seek ways to feed and care for all of them.
- (b) Ownership: After spending some years loving, caring and feeding a flock, it is rather 'human' to think we have acquired some rights among them. Some innocently begin to speak of 'my group,' 'my disciples' and 'my church.' From the outset the Lord makes this point very clear to Peter: you are invited to serve my people, but they are and will always be *my* lambs and *my* sheep. It is *my* flock. Clarity on ownership is both a protection for the flock and an encouragement to brothers and sisters with a shepherd heart to give their best.

### 2. The flock has many needs

The successful maintenance of a flock involves giving timely attention to many needs. The description of the 'foolish shepherd' found in Zachariah 11:16 illustrates four key tasks of all good shepherds: (1) care for the lost, (2) seek the young (3) heal the injured, and (4) feed the healthy. In this short conversation, the Lord Jesus brings some of the flock's needs to Peter's attention.

- (a) Food: What did the Lord tell Peter to do? “Feed my lambs” (v.15), “Take care of my sheep” (v.16) and “Feed my sheep” (v.17). The flock needs care and food. As good mothers know, a good balanced diet is the basis for a healthy growing family. Every speaker has his favorite topics. But what does your congregation currently need? Is the Bible teaching in your youth group or Sunday school balanced? Growing Christians need regular and balanced food. Bear in mind that some sheep, for a time, may require a special diet.
- (b) Feeders: Months earlier the Lord Jesus drew the disciples’ attention to some birds who were flying by or feeding on a field: “Look at the birds of the air” He said, “they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matt. 6:26). Yes, there are times when our heavenly Father feeds His saints directly. But in this conversation the Lord Jesus is making it clear to Peter that His flock also needs men and women who care enough for the lambs and sheep to lead them to green pastures, to consider their needs and prepare food for them. The flock needs ‘feeders.’ Are you called to feed others with God’s Word? Your own children? A home Bible study group? A congregation? Keep up the good work! Keep giving it your best! Most of the time, most of us are also on the receiving end. Feeders also need to eat, and frequently our heavenly Father will feed us through others. Do you allow others to feed you? If you are a gifted teacher or you prefer to listen to a particular speaker, remember that the answer to the question ‘was it good food?’ is more important than ‘who gave the food?’

### **3. Special flock feeders**

Many governments have fairly rigid hygiene guidelines for kitchens in schools, hospitals and restaurants. A certificate confirming an ability to cook a couple of tasty dishes is usually not the only requirement. Before the Lord Jesus delegated the important task of caring for and feeding His flock, He asked Peter a penetrating question.

- (a) ‘Do you truly love me?’ Three times the Lord asked Peter about the state of his heart (v.15, 16, 17). We are told that “Peter was hurt because Jesus asked for the third time ‘do you love me’”(v. 17). Why did the Lord Jesus insist? Why did he hurt Peter? Clearly the Chief Shepherd does not wish to place part of His flock under the care of someone who is not passionately in love with Him. If we truly love Him, we will also love His people. If we try to feed a flock without love for Christ and for His flock, we may be tempted to push, to shout at or to manipulate the sheep. Lambs and sheep can sometimes be stubborn animals. If in doubt, have a close look at yourself! Only after receiving a genuine positive answer from Peter, did the Lord ask him to feed and care for His flock. Is your feeding driven by love?
- (b) ‘Follow me’ After entrusting Peter with feeding and caring for His sheep, the Lord shared with Peter some personal information about his future: “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God” (v.19). Would you like to be given some hints on when and how you will die? It is good to know that through our death we can also glorify God. After giving Peter this personal bit of information, the Lord Jesus added: “Follow me!” (v.19). If we are to glorify God with our life and with our death, we must follow Him. If we follow the Lord Jesus, we shall also encourage the lambs and sheep to follow Jesus. We lead by example. Feeders who follow Jesus, who enjoy spending time with Him and in His Word will receive from Him fresh food to feed His flock.

## 4. Fellow shepherds

At this stage in the conversation, Peter had been commissioned by the Good Shepherd to feed and care for His lambs and sheep. He was also told by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then the apostle John walked by where Jesus and Peter were talking. Peter became curious. Pointing at John, Peter asked, "Lord, what about him?" (v.21).

- (a) Comparisons: Was John also commissioned to feed and care for the flock? Would he die young or old? Would he die like Peter? Are you also somewhat curious and sometimes critical or judgmental about the ministry of others? Do you feel that others should be serving the Lord like you do? Do you sometimes feel you are in competition with a similar ministry or with a fellow believer? Of course we can happily learn from each other, but be careful with comparisons. They can easily awaken pride in our heart or lead to depressive and discouraging thoughts. The answer the Lord Jesus gave Peter is simple and quite instructive: "...what is that to you?" (v. 22). Focus on your own calling, your own ministry, your own area of responsibility. We may all be shepherds of a small part of the flock, but the Lord Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, remains responsible for the whole flock – including your fellow shepherds.
- (b) Success: Peter had now been reinstated, commissioned and encouraged to avoid meddling outside his area of responsibility. Then come the last words Jesus spoke to Peter: "You must follow me" (v.22). These are very similar to the first words He spoke to Peter on the first time they met: "Come, follow me" (Matt. 4:18). Success is not measured in how many fish Peter could fish, on the size of the flock he cared for, or on the opinions of sheep, wolves or fellow shepherds. The Chief Shepherd wants to feed and care for His sheep often through human shepherds, the likes of you and me. Success is the natural outcome of a life which consistently follows Jesus.

## Conclusion

Are you feeling tired of feeding those lambs and sheep who walk around in your area of influence? Remember that those elderly saints, those children, those families are *His* lambs, *His* sheep, they are part of *His* great flock. His flock needs good food - food that comes from spending time with the Lord and in His word. His flock needs good feeders - feeders that truly love the Lord, that follow Him and love His people. Has the Lord called you to feed some of His sheep? The Lord Jesus loves and cares each one of His lambs and sheep, so keep on feeding yourself and feeding others. Give it your best! The One who called you is also watching you. "And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Peter 5:4).

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