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Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer", Clapham  
on Wednesday evening, 22nd. September, 1954

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Text: "And when He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him: for they know His voice." John 10.4

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These are the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, the great Shepherd of the sheep. He had many different ways of teaching those who were about Him in the days of His flesh, often by parables, showing that many who may assume themselves to be right are altogether out of the secret, while others who may have many fears, much conflict and yet some real experience of divine truth, are indeed His chosen and redeemed sheep.

One point here, evidently is, to show that there is only one Shepherd in the proper sense. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the Shepherd. There are, it is true, under-shepherds who 'feed the flocks' instrumentally, but the Lord Jesus Christ is that great Shepherd, that "good Shepherd" who laid down His life for the sheep! The teaching is to show that there is only one Way, only one Person whereby we can be saved, only one "Door", one Saviour, one Friend, one God, one salvation. According to the parable here all who attempt to 'climb up some other way' are but pretenders, thieves and robbers. There is only one Way into the fold and that is by going through the door. The Lord Jesus Himself is the Door and the Shepherd of the sheep. He speaks very confirmingly and graciously in the parable, in regard to these sheep, of how secure they are in His hands, that He loved them from everlasting and laid down His life for them, that they were His Father's gift to Him, and that no man shall ever pluck them out of His or His Father's hand. It is a choice moment, then, when a poor sinner is favoured to feel that he is, after all one of the Lord's sheep and that this good Shepherd has taken notice of him. All by nature, "have gone astray". According to the figure in the prophecy of Isaiah, "All we like sheep have gone astray." That is very true, is it not? Yet he says, "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all." That is, of all these sheep of whatever nation, rank or standing they may be.

There are some beautiful points in the figure used here, which the Lord Jesus refers to particularly, and one great point upon my mind is that He refers to them as His own sheep. He never makes a mistake about a sheep, neither does He have to question whether this or that one is a sheep or not. As far as we are concerned, we may, at times, have many questionings about ourselves and may feel in the dark about some others, but this Shepherd has a perfect knowledge of all His sheep. It does not matter where they are, or how far they

go away from Him and wander in the wilderness, He says by the prophet Ezekiel, "I will both search My sheep, and seek them out....in the cloudy and dark day." So He will. Although in their own poor hearts they may be determined to take this or that course, yet if one is a sheep according to the covenant purposes of God, then the appointed time will come when that sheep must be brought into the fold.

"There is a period known to God  
When all His sheep, redeemed by blood,  
Shall leave the hateful ways of sin,  
Turn to the fold, and enter in."

I would like then to emphasise this point, because it has not been without a little sweetness in my own heart. The Lord, here speaks of them as His own sheep. A shepherd may have a number of sheep, whom he calls his own, for whom he particularly cares and whom he watches over, but in a far higher sense the Lord's dear people are His own sheep and they do not belong to anyone else. They are exclusively His own property, they are His own sheep to do what He will with, as He may dispose. Even in regard to material things, if we have a certain property or possess something, we feel we should have the liberty to do with that as we will, and so it is with the Lord Jesus Christ in a far higher sense. "His own sheep." His own sheep by gifts, because they are according to His own word, given to Him. He said, in that wonderful prayer, "Thine they were, and Thou gavest them Me; and they have kept Thy word." That is a mark of a sheep. Thou gavest them Me.

I agree there is a great mystery here, but personally I have not the slightest question in my own mind, that every vessel of mercy was given by the eternal Father to Christ before the world was. This must go back into the immutable purposes of the covenant of grace where everything was settled and decided upon and to be without any subsequent revision with regard to every vessel of mercy; sometimes it has been a great thought, but at least we might venture to feel a hope that we were there, that we were one of the sheep in that covenant of grace which was "from everlasting". They are therefore His own by gift, given to Him to keep and not to part with. It was, so to speak, an eternal gift, a gift of love. Not only are they His own sheep in this sense, by gift, but they are His own sheep by purchase too, for He gave more for them than ever we can possibly conceive. It may, in a sense, seem strange that as they were given to Him there should be a need for the purchase of them, but there was as much need for the purchase of them as for the gift of them, for when they were given to Him, they were given Him to be redeemed, given to Him for a particular purpose, given to Him to undertake all responsibility on their behalf - they are His by purchase. When we purchase an article we consider that article to be our personal property; so it is with the Lord Jesus Christ and His sheep. They are His by

purchase. We find the apostle Paul referring to this in writing to the Corinthians, "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's".

What was the price which was paid? I know it can be easy to answer that question theologically; at the same time if we were, in some measure, led into that text, we might feel some humbling of our spirit within us, and might also feel some brokenness and contrition of heart, to realise that such a tremendous price was paid for such worthless creatures as we are in and of ourselves. He gave all He had to give for these sheep who were given to Him, and all this was decreed in the covenant purposes of the Trinity, in the covenant of grace, and when the dear Redeemer received them from His Father, He received them knowing fully what the receiving of them would mean to Him - that it would cost Him His own life. So, "in the fulness of time" He appeared in human flesh, to undertake and complete the mighty work of redemption, to lay down His life that these sinners lost and ruined in themselves, might live through Him, because all true, real spiritual living is living by His death. O, it was a price He paid - a price beyond all our comprehension. He gave all He had to give and the price was His own heart's blood; it was a price that was accepted at the hand of His Father at the hand of justice.

They are His own sheep that He puts forth thus on their pilgrimage - "He putteth forth His own sheep." But they are His own sheep in another sense; they are His own sheep in a union that subsists between them. This truth is very beautifully clarified by the Lord in John 15, where he refers to the union under the figure of a vine and its branches, which is a very speaking figure, because there cannot be any life in the branch unless that life is derived from the root and stem; it can only live while it abides in union. So it is with every vessel of mercy - they can only live in a spiritual sense while in union with Him. This must be so, because it is His life that is in them. "Because I live, ye shall live also". As the life and vigour flows into the branch from the root, so in spiritual experience. "In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" so His people receive all the fulness and grace for grace. You may wonder whether you are one of His sheep or not, that is to say, if now quickened into divine life, you will feel the workings of this life in your heart; it must be so - if there is any life there, you will feel its inward movings in a great variety of ways. There is no life in a dead person, naturally speaking, neither is there in one "dead in trespasses and sins", but when one is quickened into divine life, the actions of that life will be proved. This is where the union is proved - there will be no life if no union, so where the life is operative

within, in its different actings of hope, faith, love, prayer and seeking after Him, pressing the case, occasionally getting a little touch, some token for good, going up and down, sometimes ready to give up, and at another time feeling some reviving and encouragement and able to press on - all these are very gracious and confirming evidences of union with the Lord Jesus Christ. After all, this is not the life of nature but of grace, and of one who is brought forth, delivered from the dominion of sin and made a partaker of the divine nature. These are His own sheep, He putteth them forth; He knows them every one; He never makes a mistake, He will never make a mistake about you or me. Whether we belong to Him or not may be a great question with us, there is no question about it with the Shepherd, for He says, "I know My sheep, and am known of Mine". It works both ways although with this difference, that He has a perfect knowledge of them, and their knowledge of Him according to their own feelings, (at least according to mine) may be very, very small. But still there is this point to consider, that wherever by divine revelation in the heart, there is any knowledge of the glorious Person of Emmanuel, He will, by that knowledge, become so attractive, that there will be a reaching forth in the heart's affections after Him, to know Him more clearly, more fully, to have a deeper and closer acquaintance with Him. Even the apostle Paul felt like this when he said, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death".

They are His own sheep. There is another point in this - they are His own sheep to love them, as He does every one of His own sheep, because they are His property, and He paid too great a price for them ever to forsake them; in fact, His love reveals itself, in the purchase price He paid to redeem them from the curse of sin; no love can be greater than this as we have been reading, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down His life for His friends", said the Lord Himself. There will never be greater love than that! The apostle Paul says in the epistle to the Romans, "For a good man some would even dare to die" but with regard to the Lord Jesus Christ, he says, "When we were yet without strength ..... Christ died for the ungodly." His love rises and exceeds all other loves. "God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." O what a mercy if you and I are in that "us", if we could feel that "He was made sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him!" Now this is what we need and this is what it will be our mercy to feel, this will confirm us that we are indeed one of His sheep. It is wonderful love, love surpassing thought or sense, that the Redeemer bears to His sheep. This the apostle refers to, "That we may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth,

and height; And to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge". To have a taste of that is to have a taste of heaven; to feel His love is to have the earnest of immortal joys; nothing will draw us to Him like this. They are His own sheep to love them and this love in Him was "from everlasting." "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end". Love was the mighty motive that moved Him to come and assume human flesh and undertake everything that was necessarily involved, to present His chosen sheep "Not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing." "He hath done all things well!" In all His actions when He was here upon earth His love reveals itself, especially in the garden and on the cross. They are His own sheep.

Moreover it is a love that He manifests to them and favours them to feel at times in some little measure in their own hearts. It is a love that manifests itself in the application of truth to the heart, sometimes, as it were, in a whisper; He speaks it to His sheep and they know His voice, as it is said here, "They know His voice". Some of you may understand what that means; not an audible voice, as we may speak one to another - although I believe at times the Lord has spoken audibly to people, I do not question that - but usually it is the voice of His good Spirit in the heart, by the influence and authority that is felt in His word, in its application to the conscience. You may wonder, at times, whether the voice you hear is the Lord's voice or not, but whether it is the Lord's voice or not can be usually affirmed by what is felt under it. If it enters, penetrates and softens your spirit, brings you down before Him, draws you out toward Him, brings some gracious, confirming strength into your soul, then it is the Lord's voice! It can be a still, small voice, I know, but it is the Lord's voice. As to this voice, He speaks in different ways, sometimes by warning, sometimes by exhortation, or by invitation. I have heard some of the Lord's people say that they have distinctly felt the power of this or that Scripture, just as much as though it had been audibly spoken, and I can quite understand that. Take such a word as the Saviour says, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Say you, How may I know that is the Lord's voice" Why, by this; if it is the Lord's voice, then in your heart there will be a gracious response, you will feel the authority of it, and it will be very clearly felt too; you will feel drawn to Him, you will say,

"Lo! glad I come, and Thou, blest Lamb,  
Shalt take me to Thee as I am"

There is a coming, a responding to His voice, and, moreover, He can give you to feel that rest, to enjoy it, although your circumstances at the very same time may be of a very distracting nature. I know this to be true, although I know (at least as far as I am concerned) they are rare experiences; but I feel

sure of this, and I know some of you can testify to it, that the Lord has, at times, spoken by a word and by what you have felt you have said, That is the voice of my Jesus, the voice of my Beloved, the voice of my Saviour, I know it, I know it is His voice. You see these sheep "know not the voice of strangers"; they can tell the difference. This is literally true of the sheep in the East, I know, but it is true of the Lord's people in respect of His voice. It can be as true as it was with Elijah on Mount Horeb when the Lord passed by and a great and strong wind shook the mountain, then an earthquake, then a fire, but the Lord did not speak audibly in them. But afterward there was a still, small voice that entered effectually into the heart of Elijah and brought him to the mouth of the cave with his face covered with his mantle. This can be very sweet.

Well, have you ever heard His voice? This is a mark of a sheep. Perhaps some may say, I do not know that I have ever heard His voice and therefore have no mark of a sheep. You have no reason whatever to say that. You bear a mark of a sheep if there is in your heart a longing desire to hear His voice, and if you cannot be satisfied until you are, so to speak, told by God's own mouth that He has chosen you. He calls His own sheep; it is only His own sheep that He ever speaks to in a way of grace and mercy - no one else. The Lord did speak to many in the days of His flesh that were not of His sheep, but He only speaks to His sheep in a gracious, saving way, so that His words enter with an effect into their hearts. It is sweet when you can hope you have heard it; it will make you say as the hymnwriter:-

"Why was I made to hear Thy voice,  
And enter while there's room;  
When thousands make a wretched choice,  
And rather starve than come?"

You would rather starve than come, and so should I, if left to ourselves. According to the parable of the great supper, if left to ourselves, the oxen, the land, the wife will all come first, before Him. Everything else will come before Him if we are left to ourselves. But when the good Shepherd takes a sheep in hand and turns him round, the difference is this, He comes before everything else. If He does not come before everything else to the comfort of your heart, He comes before everything else in the desire for Him, and if He comes before everything else in the desire for Him, one day He will come before everything else in the possession of Him. It is wonderful to have a real religion; it is very sweet to be brought, for just a minute or two in your life, to be able to say, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want".

They are His sheep to go before them. This is a great and important point, because in this going before them, we can be assured of His perfect knowledge of them, not only His knowledge of their persons but also His knowledge

of their sins, their trials, their difficulties, their burdens, their cross, their sufferings and their destiny. There is not one sheep who has ever gone to heaven but the Shepherd has gone before him! Well, He has gone before him through this vale of tears, gone before him in the path of tribulation, gone before him in all the conflict, trial, opposition and persecution, that one or another may be called upon to suffer. It can be a very, very sweet moment when we are favoured to feel the sympathy of our great High Priest. The apostle has a wonderful word; he said, "We have not an high Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." Perhaps you might say, Then that temptation could not have had any force. It had more force than ever on that account; although the Redeemer had no sin, yet temptation was a suffering to Him. The apostle says, "For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted."

He goes before them to guide them in this wilderness because they are His own sheep. Just as much as He guided the children of Israel through the wilderness, as "He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation" so He goes before His own sheep. Perhaps you say, I feel to be like "a wayfaring man", "I grope for the wall like the blind", I do not know where I am, I seem to be out of the secret. Yes, you may be all that, and in the place that Asaph got into, and yet at the same time the Lord is leading you on. "I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known; I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them and not forsake them". No, He will never take you up and drop you down, never! When once He begins, when He takes a sheep in hand, He will lead that sheep through this wilderness. He will never leave them nor forsake them. He goes before them. He has gone before them in the path of trial and suffering, He goes before them in experience. Sometimes in a very particular way this is seen, even in their providences. They see this good Shepherd going before them to open a door here and close a door there. If we are indeed His sheep, we shall look to Him to take us in hand and lead us in the right way, to preserve and keep us from breaking through hedges and from backsliding, of which we may be guilty; we shall, as exercised, look to Him to bring us through this vale of tears and eventually grant us an abundant entrance into His everlasting kingdom.

Then it is said that "they follow Him". The two things go together; if there is no leading, there is no following. These sheep follow Him because they know His voice, according to the word here, "The sheep follow Him: for they know His voice". And you will feel that in your own heart, more or less, when the Lord is pleased to give you a directing word; He will give with that word

in your heart faith and confidence to follow Him. Why do these sheep follow? Because they have confidence in Him; they have been brought to know Him, or at least to hope in Him as being their Shepherd.

"He goeth before them" to provide for them, to nourish them in the wilderness, and they "follow Him" because He is their food, their life, their strength, their joy. So we read in the song that the sheep was veiled or out of the way. "Tell me, O Thou whom my soul loveth, where Thou feedest, where Thou makest Thy flock to rest at noon; for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of Thy companions?" What was the Lord's answer to her? "If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents".

O but it is a very poor following with us, is it not? Do you feel you follow Him as you might do or as you should do? When we look at our following we may be much ashamed and feel in this aspect to be like Peter who "followed Him afar off". But O we do need His grace! We need His grace to follow Him, to follow His word, His teaching, His exhortations, follow Him according to that way in which He would have His sheep to follow Him. "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." Sometimes it is a very sweet following, when His presence is felt in your heart, when He favours you with a sweet touch of His love, humbles you down, and brings into your heart some of the good things of the gospel; then there is a holy, sweet willingness to follow Him, to "bear the cross and despise the shame".

There is a following Him in keeping His commandments. The Lord speaks of His commandments and one of these is to "love one another". There are many commandments, gospel commandments, and there are also His ordinances, which are His commandments to His believing people. It has been, at times, sweet, with some of us I believe, when we have felt enabled thus to "follow Him", to "put Him on" and "make no provision for the flesh". Well, may the Lord grant us a confirming token, and give us to feel a hope at least, that we are of "His own sheep", and if that is felt, may we have grace to follow HIM, to be a little as it was with Caleb, who followed the Lord "fully". May the Lord look upon us, bless us with His good gospel, keep us together in His holy fear, nourish us with Himself, with His own flesh and blood, be our good Shepherd to go before us - and may He give us grace to follow Him. Amen