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Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer", Clapham
on April 1st., 1951

Text: Song of Solomon 1. 7 - 8

"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? If thou known not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents."

It will be seen at once that the language here is the language of a living child of God. It may indeed be a lamb in Christ's fold, but it is certainly one that is in Christ's fold, otherwise there would not be the enquiry, the desire, the hunger, and the earnest longing for living, spiritual food, and for communion with her Beloved.

O how expressive this word may be, I do not know; but it may be very expressive of the heart feelings of some here in this congregation. And what a wonderful mercy if that is so, because we know that where there is a living spiritual panting after the water-brooks, to be brought in gracious experience into the green pastures and beside the still waters of His blessed Gospel, that desire will surely in the Lord's time be granted and abundantly answered.

Some of the Lord's children may come to the verge of despair, and may feel ready to perish and to give everything up. At the same time the Word of God reaches mercifully unto such cases. "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them."

Well now, is this enquiry in your heart, sinner? Are there lambs in the fold of Christ here who are bleating after this manner, saying inwardly, mentally, and it may be in prayer, "Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest." Well, what was it that brought you to such a point as that, to be able to say, "Whom my soul loveth"? Perhaps you feel you could not go as far as that; it may seem like presuming in the case of some; but you can say, "Tell me, O Thou whom my soul would love; whom I desire to love, and whom if I had grace I would love, tell me where thou feedest."

You see, in the experience of the Lord's people, not only with the bleating lambs, but with some of the older sheep, with those that are more matured by years of experience in the things of God, they get into very lonely, distant, desolate places. It is not only the lambs who lament in this way and say, "Why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of Thy companions." Many of us at times come to such a pass as to wonder whether after all we are really sheep or not. I know ministers do, at least I know one who does, and who, feeling at times so painfully desolate, does wonder after all whether having preached to others he shall be a castaway. It seems something like this; here is a flock of sheep feeding. Here they are; they are contented, happy, they are all gathered together; but there is another over the hedge, got into another track somehow, broken away from the flock, lonely, desolate, and feeling it too, painfully, and yet unable to recover itself. They say when a sheep gets on to its back it cannot get up again without help; and sure it is when the poor children of God get into a cold, distant, and often backsliding state, they become so helpless in that condition as to be unable to return in their own strength. They need the Lord to come and bring them up again from the depths of the earth.

Are there any here this evening now who feel to be at a painful distance from their Beloved? Are there those that have enjoyed that choice communion, but yet now feel desolate, distant? Are there some who feel they could not say they have ever known that communion and who, while outwardly they may have some marks of a sheep, and mingle with the Lord's people, meet with them in His ways and ordinances, yet feel to be left out, feel to be as here "like one that is veiled" (see margin) like a sheep and yet not one, having possibly some outward signs, and yet feeling to lack the inward grace? O what a tender word it is the Lord has to say to such! He does not cut them off, does He? If He did, what hope would there be for me or what hope would there be for you? What does He say in answer to such an enquiry? Why, He says, "If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the foot-steps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents." Now one of the sweetest privileges the Lord's children have is to be fed, to be nourished in their souls with living, spiritual Bread, which

is the Lord Himself in the communications of His grace. Is your soul being fed? That may reflect in a way upon the poverty of the preacher, but mercifully the Lord is not confined to actual ordinances in this particular, but He can and He does come and feed His sheep in a free and sovereign way; although He will acknowledge and own and use His appointments which are to be observed and attended to. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching". It is there that, if your soul is hungry, the Lord comes and feeds the flock, comes with the food, comes Himself by His sacred presence in the midst. So it is when the Lord brings His children into the banqueting house and spreads over them His banner of everlasting love.

But what is this food? Why, it is a receiving in a spiritual understanding by way of gracious application, the blessed Gospel. Perhaps some of you will have to say, I do not feel to have much religion. I know many of the people of God have gone a long way past me, I feel to be far behind many, I have but very, very little religion, and I feel to be like them that have turned aside by the flocks of His companions. But can you say that you love the Gospel? Why is it then that in your soul you love the Gospel? Why, it is because the Lord has made it meat and drink to your soul, or in other words, it is because the Lord has made Himself precious in your soul's affections, if only in the desire for Him, but I believe also in the receiving of Him so as that you must and do live alone upon His fulness. There are communications in this feeding made to living souls, to those who go to the feeding-places, where the Lord spreads the table and brings forth a divine repast. While the King sits at the table your affections move toward Him. It will fill the place with fragrance and sweetness. It is His banqueting-house where He feeds His flock, and the feeding is faith's receiving in a spiritual way of the flesh and blood of Christ. It is the sweet living contemplation of the soul by faith upon His wondrous incarnatizyou have foundon, His human nature, His glorious Person as very God and very man. It is that sacred, holy fellowship that your soul is at times indulged with, when by faith you view His wounded hands and feet and weep to the praise of the mercy you have found; when by faith you view a risen Jesus and live

by that life according to His word, "Because I live, you shall live also." And when you receive of the dispensing of His divine favours in the forgiveness of sin, when you receive the Paschal Lamb, view His precious blood shed for your guilty sins and obtain ease in your conscience through the atonement, are able to say with Thomas "My Lord and my God", when your spirit rejoices and you fall before His cross in humble faith and see the curse of sin borne away for you and an opened way to heaven through the merit of His blood and the perfection of His righteousness; as your soul is favoured in secret or in public to meditate on these blessed realities and to receive them in the sacred hope of an interest in them, so it is that you eat His flesh and drink His blood.

But O, at times how far removed we are from this spiritual vocation; what mountains of sin and guilt lie between us. But if you have known His love, and some of you have, O how you will long to be brought back again to the banqueting-house. "Tell me, O Thou whom my soul loveth, where Thou feedest, where Thou makest Thy flock to rest at noon." We know that in Eastern lands the shepherd leads the flock after a weary journey in the heat of the day to a sheltered place where they can feed and have rest, and all this is very descriptive of how the Lord leads His spiritual sheep. He gives them not only food, but rest that follows the feeding. "Where Thou makest Thy flock to rest at noon", or "Where Thou doest provide shelter from the burning heat of the noonday sun." What is this rest then? Why, it is that enjoyment or sense of satisfaction that a living soul is favoured to feel in what a Saviour is. If you are at times favoured spiritually to feed upon Him, that feeding will be followed by resting, that is to say, it will bring a sweet sense of satisfaction into your soul. There is a wonderful rest here. The Apostle Paul writing to the Hebrews says, "There remaineth therefore a rest unto the people of God." Perhaps you say, "That rest is Heaven." So it is, but the rest can be known here, in the sweet earnest of it, when the love of Christ is shed abroad in the heart. O this is a wonderful rest. What a state of unrest sin has brought, has it not? O the trouble, affliction, guilt and death that sin has brought! There is no rest. The dove found no rest for the sole of its foot when the waters covered the earth, so it returned to the ark. So it is with a vessel of mercy. He can find no rest in earthly

things, no rest in material things, no rest in self and no rest in his own works, no rest short of Christ. That is true, don't you think? For the more you may try to settle down in things, even in a temporal way, (and I know there is a right and proper way of enjoying of our mercies, for the Lord giveth us richly all things to enjoy) there is no real rest for your soul in any material thing. And that is a sign, is it not, of being one of the Lord's sheep?

But what a mercy it is, amidst all the tribulation and trouble and difficulties and burdens that at times press so heavily upon the Lord's children, the despondency whereby they are greatly cast down, the disquietude which is upon them, and the things that vex their spirits, O, what a mercy it is to find a little rest for your soul, I mean a sweet enjoyment of spiritual satisfaction in the Redeemer, to view Him by precious faith and to see in Him all your poor soul needs, and to feel that all is for you, as the apostle Paul has it, "All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all are yours, and ye are Christ's and Christ is God's." And if you have faith to receive Christ in your heart in the sweet enjoyment of His blessed presence, you will feel as though all heaven and earth is yours and you would not change for a thousand worlds. O, when He comes and fills you, what a wonderful rest it is, what a sweet rest. It is peculiar; no-one can adequately describe it; but some of you know what it is, after perhaps days of darkness; and indeed the days of darkness are many. How good it is to be brought forth into light again and to enjoy this wonderful rest - as said the Psalmist: "Return unto thy rest, O my soul, for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee." O those days, those dark days, those heavy days, when you may have felt that everything was against you, that the Lord was angry with you, that His people were suspicious of you; and as to your own case, you felt to be out of the secret, you laboured in darkness, bound under fetters, held under a broken law, under the sense of death, wading through these things. Then how sweet to be brought into the light of His countenance, to enjoy fellowship with Him and to enter the rest which the cross provides! It seems to be described here very sweetly in the second chapter: "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my Beloved

among the sons. I sat down under His shadow with great delight and His fruit was sweet to my taste." Not "I ran this way and that." No - "I sat down - this is the rest - with great delight, and His fruit was sweet to my taste." Do you know anything of that sweet experience?

Here is the food and here is the rest. And just a moment or two of this rest is so refreshing. You are satisfied with the Lord's purpose concerning you, satisfied with His providence, satisfied with the place where He has placed you, satisfied with your situation, satisfied with His leadings, satisfied with your sphere in life. O, what a rest it is. No quarrelling with God, no disputing about His ways, fighting against His purposes, but entering into rest. "Lord," said one,

"Lord, I believe a rest remains
To all Thy people known,
A rest where pure enjoyment reigns
And Thou art loved alone."

O, you may get a moment of that rest here, when the Lord comes and fills you with His goodness, and truly it is a wonderful rest. But not only does it imply satisfaction, but also security. You feel so safe, don't you? At such a time you are sensibly dwelling in the secret place of the Most High, and under the shadow of the Almighty. His wings, as it were cover you. His loving-kindness is over you. There is such a sense of security and safety, it removes fear, brings a holy confidence, and when you feel thus that Jesus is your Jesus, you fear no enemy. You can believe that you will come through more than conqueror.

Yes, and it is also a wonderful shelter. The rest here is the rest the Cross provides, rest from impending wrath, from a broken, fiery law that brings an awful curse to every transgressor; there is such a sense of deliverance here. It is a wonderful thing to lie down at night and to feel that the Lord has led your soul a little into the green pastures of His grace; and they are always fresh and green. The Gospel is like a living spring. Actually it never runs dry though at times the Lord's poor people feel to be very dry; but the Gospel is the same, and when there are any fresh communications of it, blessings in your soul, why, it is as fresh as ever it was. "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?" There seems to be what might be termed a tender reproof in the Lord's answer. "If thou know not, O

thou fairest among women" - "if thou know not," - as if He would say "Well, you should know where I feed My flock, but still, if you do not know, then do this, - "go thy way forth by the foot-steps of the flock and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents." But here is something to be noticed in the way the Shepherd speaks unto His sheep or rather the Bridegroom to the bride. "If thou know not, O thou fairest among women." Not "You are like the tents of Kedar, not fit to be seen. I will have nothing to do with you." No, but "O thou fairest among women." But how can the Lord speak to these daughters of Jerusalem like this? You say, "I am black, unfit to be seen, all soiled and blackened, like the tents of Kedar." But in the Lord's eyes you are like the curtains of Solomon, all this beautiful tapestry, so beautifully finished. I do not know what they were like but they must have been very beautiful. He says to her, "O thou fairest among women." But wherein, then, does this beauty consist? Why, it consists in the union that subsists between the two parties. "My Beloved is mine and I am His," is the language of the church. And here Christ addresses her after the same manner. "Thou art all fair My love, there is no spot in thee." No, not a spot. "O thou fairest among women." But this beauty and this attraction consists in the union that is between them, it is not in herself, but in Him, that she is without spot, as the Bride of Christ - not only in the union subsisting, but in the communion enjoyed. Yes, in the communion. "I sat down under His shadow....He brought me into the banqueting-house," and had communion and fellowship with Him. There was such a sweet flowing together between the two, inward affections enjoyed in that holy spiritual way.

But it is not only in communion enjoyed that the Church is fairest among women, but also in the clothing put upon her, that covers her, as it is in Isaiah, where we read "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness." Ah, this is where the beauty is. It is His own comeliness that is put upon her, so that He beholds no iniquity in Jacob or perverseness in Israel. "Fairest among women". O these poor black things, who do not feel worthy to be taken any notice of at all, they are the fairest among women in the eyes of Christ. This is the Church. There

is beauty in her in His eyes as washed in His blood and clothed in His righteousness.

Yes, but not only so; there is a beauty in her tone of voice. He likes to hear it. These doves that get in the stairs, what does He say to them? Why, "Let Me see thy countenance. Come out into the open. Not only "Let Me see thy countenance", but "Let Me hear thy voice, for sweet is thy voice and thy countenance is comely." O, perhaps you will say 'The Lord does not want to hear what I have got to say. It is not worth hearing.' But these are just the poor things that He does like to hear. These confessions, there is beauty even in them. "Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For since I spake against him I do earnestly remember him still." O that sweet shame, that sweet unworthiness, that shame of self! You know when the Lord comes with His wonderful love, it makes you feel to be nothing. It makes you so ashamed of yourself. And yet you do love Him that ever He should have shown His love to such a base wretch as you feel to be. He takes notice of this. "Let Me hear thy voice", do not be silent. Speak out. "Let Me hear thy voice." There is something attractive about the tone of it. "Sweet is thy voice and thy countenance is comely." There is a beauty, and so with the Church as the bride of Christ, betrothed, joined in union with Him. She is the Lamb's wife, clothed in fine linen, she is arrayed in her wedding garment, washed and clothed. "O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents."

Here is a direction then, not "Well, are you under the stairs? You stop there!" No, "Come forth". "Are you in a comfortable place? stop there". No, "Go thy way forth." These lambs in Christ's fold have to be travellers as well as the sheep. We read that He carries, bears the lambs in His arms and tenderly leads those that are with young. "Go thy way forth", that is go thy way forth from the world and from all that may be any hindrance, go forth in the ways of those that have gone before, "by the footsteps of the flock". If you walk on a very hard road you cannot see much about the footsteps or the footprints of those that have gone before; but if you go up a lane, perhaps seldom frequented, you will see if anyone has gone before you. According to this it is for the lambs or sheep to follow in the same footsteps, "the footsteps of the flock"; put your feet in their footprints, follow them; as it is in the Hebrews,

"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us". They are witnesses in the path they trod, the way they walked, their tribulation - follow on in the same way. It is a going forth in the footsteps of the flock in this sense, although the outward circumstances of the Lord's people vary very greatly, yet there is a common leading away from the world and sin and hell and all these things unto Himself; they are travellers in a wilderness, following on in the ways of their fathers. And these footsteps are the footsteps of faith and love and hope and Gospel obedience. Those that have gone before have suffered for Christ's sake, have taken up their cross and followed Him. You follow on, bear your cross, yield obedience to His ways, "Go forth in the footsteps of the flock", and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents", - the sanctuary; bring the children however young they may be, according to the Scriptures, bring the children and even those that suck the breasts. However young or tender they may be, if life is there, bring them to be fed beside the shepherds' tents. Yes, because this is where the Lord comes.

Well, may the Lord make this little place a shepherd's tent; a shepherd's tent can be taken down and moved from one place to another, churches rise and fall and so does everything change here, but while this is a shepherd's tent may the Lord condescend to come and feed the flock and use the ministry and nourish us, young and old, babes in Christ, young men, fathers; all need feeding beside the shepherds' tents. Amen

For further copies please write to:

I.Fuller and Friends, 9 Sibella Road, London, SW4 6JA