

Acts 20:28 **Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.** ²⁹ *I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.* ³⁰ *Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.* ³¹ *So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*

³² *“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*

Fellow Sheep Following Our Good Shepherd,

Right across the road from us is grazing land. Even if that road is wide, sometimes the cattle are close enough to hear. We love that sound! (You have to realize that Lisa grew up on a farm and I grew up in Wisconsin’s dairy country – so we grew up thinking that cow manure was the way things were supposed to smell.) Well, when we look out at those cows, you know what we never see? We never see a cow herder.

One cannot always leave livestock untended. One family kept chickens, usually a few dozen. The chicken house had a door, and one of the kids or parents would go in twice a day to collect eggs and feed and water the chickens. The yard was fully fenced in, and then the chicken run was fenced in too. A fence inside a fence, and dogs in the yard. It seemed pretty safe, so they didn’t worry when the chicken house door got left open. But one year the chickens started disappearing. They owners didn’t notice at first. After a while there weren’t as many as there should have been, so they took a head count. They came up short on that head count. What was going on? Chicken thief? Wild animals?

I don’t know what the Apostle Paul saw that day. He was heading for Jerusalem, full steam ahead, across the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The boat docked on the coast, close to the city of Ephesus. In Ephesus was a church that Paul had started. He had spent more time in Ephesus than any other church he started. It was dear to his heart. So when the boat docked close by, he sent word to Ephesus asking the elders (think, church council) to come and visit him. He thought it might be his last chance to see them.

When they arrived, what did Paul hear from them? What did he see? I don’t know. Did he do a head count and notice that one or two church elders he expected were not there? Had he heard reports? I don’t know. But as he looked on these dearly beloved church elders, he said, **“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood”** (28).

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He is the one who bought us with his own blood. Remember the Gospel reading? The Good Shepherd is the one who also puts under-shepherds as the direct care-givers for his flock. When a pastor is called, we treat that as a divine call – a call from God through his Church. We do that on the basis of this Scripture which says, **“Keep watch over...all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”** (28). In our second reading we read, *“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”* (1 Peter 5:2-3). Our Good Shepherd Jesus, has chosen to put the care of his Church into the hands of mere men, pastors and church leaders. No one can take that charge lightly for it is of great importance. No one can take that charge proudly, for we serve under one greater. But we can take it confidently, for Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, has called

us and given us the tools we need.

As Paul looked at the Ephesian shepherds, he felt two emotions.

First of all, he had great joy over them. Jesus had bought each of them with his own blood. He had paid for their sins. They were saved. They were leaders in the church, and they had been willing to walk 30 miles to see him, their spiritual father! What joy to be reunited with dearly beloved Christians, Christians strong in their faith and commitment.

Paul also felt the emotion of concern. ***“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock.”*** If Paul did not notice missing faces in *that* group of elders, he had experienced it elsewhere. He had known people interested in Jesus, and later not so interested. People who had worshiped with him, and then drifted away. Former friends who became spiritual adversaries. He thought of these people, formerly saved, but who were now separated from Jesus and tears came to his eyes. He reminds these church elders of this. He says, ***“Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears”*** (31). Not only Paul, but Jesus also felt that way. Jesus had looked at the walled city of Jerusalem, full of people who rejected him, and cried for those people.

So it is in our day. People who opt out of the flock have done something very dangerous. They are on the verge of throwing away God’s grace. And if it should ever happen that you find a church elder or a pastor on your doorstep encouraging you to come back to church, know this: it is not for your money, nor to shame you, nor scold you, but to save you. Jesus told those people to be there on your doorstep; shepherds guiding those in their care. We desire your soul’s salvation. Wandering from the flock puts someone in danger of eternal punishment and fire.

On the other hand, if you are on the other side of the conversation—if you are the one on the doorstep, or in a conversation with a wandering friend, may it be that same love that motivates you. Not a desire for church revenue, nor to shame someone, nor to scold them, but to save them. Jesus has made you a shepherd to that person.

But what is it that makes people stray from the flock?

One of the kids found a clue. The chicken house was next to a fence. Climbing the fence a kid could hike himself up to the roof. And there he made the discovery: chicken wings, feathers still on. What did it mean?

You see, we cannot be left to be free-range sheep. Free-range works as long as there are no dangers. That chicken house door was often left open because the owners hadn’t seen dangers for years. They got careless.

Spiritually, there are many dangers. That is why Jesus is called The Good Shepherd and God’s Church is called a flock. A flock is a group that sticks together. It is not a bunch of individuals widely scattered over the plains. Sheep left to themselves are wolf-food. We can’t be free-range sheep because we will be devoured.

To emphasize this point, maybe you have heard the word “saints.” In the Bible, the word “saints” always refers to believers. Sometimes it refers to living people, sometimes to those who have died, but always believers. “Saint” never refers to an individual. It always talks about a group. It points out that believers are supposed to be in groups. That group, like a flock, is part of its own protection. That group gives mutual support, mutual encouragement and mutual warning! That group calls men to be shepherds whose job it is to tend the flock, to keep Christians close to God’s Word.

But what makes sheep leave the flock?

The family thought about the chickens. The answer didn’t come right away. But as they rolled things around in their minds, finally someone thought of the screech owls they would hear once in a while in the middle of the night. They reckoned that the screech owls were coming along in the night,

and when the chicken house door was left open (which often happened) the owl just hopped in and grabbed one, went to the roof and ate its prey. It was horrific for them to think of the chickens being picked off one at a time by a terror in the darkness.

Sometimes sheep leave Jesus flock because of an outright attack. People assault the Christian and his/her beliefs. Perhaps it is the atheistic science teacher at the university. Maybe it was the time of sadness and loss when the question was, "Where is God?" Most Christians have felt those attacks on their faith. Those attacks send a shudder right down to the foundation of faith. In those times, the shepherd needs to carefully watch the sheep. The shepherd needs to respond with God's Word.

At other times the sheep wanders because it is lured away from the flock and the shepherd. The sheep sees the green grass in the next pasture. God told him not to go there, but the sheep thinks, "I'd sure like to be over there!" Nonchalantly the sheep munches and meanders farther from the flock, hoping the shepherd won't notice—oh, surely that never happens in church—until the sheep is just where it wanted to be – in the forbidden pastures. It does not consider the fact that it is separated from the flock. It does not realize how dangerous it is to walk away from the Good Shepherd. That headstrong sheep only rejoices that it got what it wanted and doesn't have to be tied down by the rules.

That is why we need shepherds: to protect us from attacks and to stop us from the wandering.

Shepherds have many different functions. When you think of that well-known psalm, Psalm 23, you hear a lot of different things a shepherd does. Many of them are very positive things: "*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul*" (2-3). But when Paul looks those dear elders from Ephesus in the eye, he focuses them on a different work which we hear in Psalm 23:5, "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*" The picture of the Good Shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders is an accurate picture of Jesus. He lifts us up. He carries us. He is our strength. But that shepherd carrying a sheep, while accurate, is incomplete. Often the shepherd must take up his staff and fight off the wolves.

At these times the shepherds role is not comforting and encouraging. Now the shepherd has to battle the lies that have a hold on a wandering Christian. He has to confront sin, condemn sin. And only when the sin is seen and repented of them, only then can he finally forgive sin.

In that work, the shepherd ought to be committed, but not overwhelmed. It is a great work that God has entrusted to church leaders. It is the care of souls which can be saved or lost for eternity. Who is worthy or capable of such a task? The simple answer is, "No one."

That is why Paul spoke these words to those church elders in front of him, "***Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.***" (32). No one is worthy or capable of the work that the Good Shepherd puts in front of him. Not if shepherding 5,000 people or simply your own child.

But Paul reminds all who care for another soul of the great tool they have, the Word of God. God the Holy Spirit works in this tool. And so it is that a sinful but saved human can still have hope, even joy in this work. For it is the Good Shepherd who has sent us out saying, "Feed my sheep." Amen.