

God's People on Earth



The Sheepfold (Part 1)
by Derek Prince

It's good to be with you again at the beginning of a new week, sharing with you Keys to Successful Living, which God has placed in my hand through many years of personal experience and Christian ministry.

The title for my talks this week is "The Sheepfold." It will help you to answer a very difficult, but also very important question: Who really are God's people in this world? This picture of God's people is found in a parable of Jesus in John 10.

But before we turn to the actual words of Jesus, it will be helpful to say a word about the nature and purpose of a parable. One of the great problems that we all have in apprehending spiritual truth is that we are tied to our senses. We tend to believe only those things which we see and feel and hear and touch and taste. We think that these are the real things and it's difficult for us to comprehend or to see the reality of things in another order. And yet we're not really correct in saying that the things that we apprehend with our senses are the real things: they're not. The things which are truly real and truly important are spiritual. And they are not apprehended by our senses.

Let me just put before you some words of Paul on this subject. In 2 Corinthians 4:18:

> "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen in eternal." (NIV)

So what Paul is saying is just the opposite of what we tend to think by nature. He's saying what we can see is only temporary. It doesn't last, it's not permanent. It's not fully real. But the fully real things are unseen. And he says we fix our eyes on what is not seen.

Again, a little further on in the same letter of Paul, 2 Corinthians 5:7, he says: "We live [or we walk] by faith, not by sight" (NIV). How can we fix our eyes on what is unseen. There is a deliberate paradox there, isn't it? You can't see the unseen. But the paradox is deliberate. Paul is saying, "We've got to learn to think differently. The truly real things are the spiritual things that we don't see."

Now, one way that the Bible helps us in this matter is through parables. The parable is a story or a picture of something familiar, material, that everybody at the time of Jesus knew about, but its real truth is not in the natural or the material, it's in the spiritual. And everything in the natural corresponds to something else in the spiritual. And so, the parable becomes a kind of mirror, reflecting the spiritual and the unfamiliar. In this way we proceed from the known to the unknown, which is one of the basic principles of good teaching. And Jesus, of course, was the perfect teacher.

With that thought about parables in mind, let's turn to the Parable of the Sheepfold, which is found in John 10:1-11 and then two verses further on. This is what Jesus said:

> "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen [or the sheepfold] by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman [or the porter or the gatekeeper] opens the gate for him and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice. Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. [Figure of speech or parable.] Therefore Jesus said again, I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it [abundantly, or] to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep." (NIV)

So that's the parable. Now let's try to identify the elements in this particular parable. Every main element in the material and the familiar has a corresponding element in the spiritual and the unseen. Well, many of the elements are already identified but let's just look through them.

First of all, the shepherd. Jesus says very clearly, "I am the shepherd."

Then, who are the sheep? That's very important. I would say that the sheep are the true disciples, or the real Christians. You see, we tend to think in terms of denominations or doctrines. Who are the real Christians? Those that belong to a certain church or believe a certain doctrine. Now, belonging to a church is important; believing doctrines is important, but that's not the mark of the real Christian. The real Christians are the ones who are the sheep of Jesus. And a little later on in this series of talks, we're going to be looking at the marks of the sheep.

Then there is the sheepfold. What is the sheepfold? The sheepfold, I believe, is the gathering place for the people of God, for the disciples of Jesus. It's the church. The church on earth. And, essentially the sheepfold is the place of separation and security. The sheep were separated from the surrounding environment, they were protected from thieves and robbers and wild beasts. So they were set apart, and being set apart, they were secure. You see, that's an important truth. Christians who are not separated from the world are not secure. You see how many different aspects of truth there are in these simple pictures.

Then another very important thing here in this parable is the doorkeeper or the watchman or the porter. Different words are used in different translations. The man who keeps the gate, the man who either keeps people out or lets people in. Now, we are not specifically told by Jesus but I believe it's very clear and very important too, the gatekeeper, the doorkeeper, the watchman, is the Holy Spirit. He's the one who admits people or excludes people. And He only admits those who have met the scriptural conditions.

And then in the background is what we would call the lord of the manor, the owner of all, the one who owns the land and the sheep and the fold and everything, and that, of course, is God the Father.

Let me go through that very quickly once more to fix it in your memory:

The shepherd is Jesus.

The sheep are the true disciples or the real Christians.

The sheepfold is the gathering place, the church, the place of separation and security.

The doorkeeper or the watchman is the Holy Spirit.

And the owner of all is God the Father.

The picture of the sheepfold that we've been looking at is very clearly a scene on earth. It's not a scene in heaven. It's very important to understand that. We could have a picture of the church in heaven, but this is a picture of the church on earth. How do we know that it's on earth? Well, Jesus speaks about the possibility of thieves or robbers climbing up by an illegitimate route into the sheepfold. Now if there are going to be thieves and robbers in the place, we know that it's not heaven, because there are no thieves and no robbers in heaven. Thank God for that! But meanwhile, though God's people have a gathering place on earth, a place of separation and security, there is always the danger or the possibility that some unauthorized person who hasn't met the qualifications, will try to make his way in. Now the gatekeeper, the Holy Spirit, will not open to such a person so he cannot come in through the gate so he's going to have to climb up some other way, as Jesus said. So we understand from this picture something very important. That though the church on earth is the meeting place, the gathering place, of God's people, and though it's a place of separation and security, yet there may be unauthorized persons, thieves and robbers in that place.

Why would we speak of thieves? Well let me suggest one reason. Because the people who climb up some other way are seeking blessings and provisions of God to which they're not entitled. They're stealing things to which they're not entitled. A thief, essentially, is somebody who takes something for himself and doesn't care much about his victims, but a robber goes further. A robber is one who harms his victim and uses violence. So they're not exactly the same, but both of them are evil persons. So we have to bear in mind that there may be evil persons even in the church while it's on earth.

And then we need to see from this parable of Jesus that access to the church involves a relationship with all three persons of the Godhead, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God the Father in this parable is somewhat in the background. He's the owner of all. But God the Son is the doorway, through which alone legitimate entrance is gained. And God the Holy Spirit is the doorkeeper. So you see, the church is so important in God's eyes that to be in the church legitimately you have to have a personal relationship with the Father, with the Son and with the Holy Spirit.

There's another parable of Jesus a little further on in John's gospel, John 15, about the true vine, where some of these same truths are brought out in that parable also. We see three persons of the Godhead. Jesus says, "I am the vine." He says, "My Father is the vinedresser [the husbandman or the farmer]." The sap that flows through the vine, the life, is the Holy Spirit. Then, the branches that are in the vine are the true disciples. So there's a close parallel between these two parables. I suggest if you can find time that you read both John 10 and John 15, the first half of each chapter. I believe you'll find that to be profitable. And, as you read a parable, always be asking yourself: Now, what is the spiritual reality to which these material things correspond?

Well, our time is up for today, but I'll be back with you again tomorrow at this same time. In my talk tomorrow, I'll be focusing on one particular aspect of the sheepfold; that is, the door.

Radio Program

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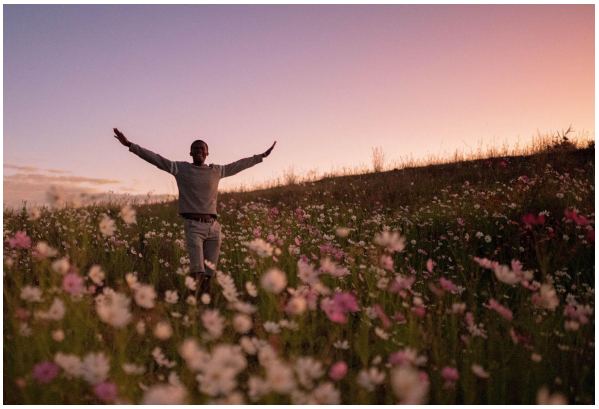

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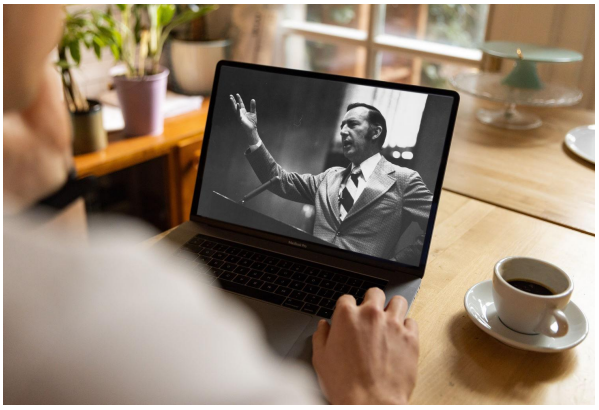

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