

Dear Friends,

While many things happen outside our control and due to nothing we do, much of life's experience mirrors how we choose to live our lives. In this sense, we choose so many of our experiences--and companions. In writing this week's Gleanings, I had reason to fondly recall a dear man whom I knew in my early days in the faith. To this day, my brief times with this dear man continue to bless me and to enrich my journey of faith. Had I not followed the faith-way, I'd never have known him or realized the blessings he quietly left with me. Our choice to remain close to the Lord's "Flock" of faithful followers always blesses us, and our choice to wander from that pathway always leaves us void of blessings, blessings we can't "Miss," because we never knew they existed.

In Biblical "Sheep lore," a sheep that wanders away from the flock is a sheep in trouble and at risk. David wisely realizes that truth as he grew older and acknowledged his own wandering path.

Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word. (Psalm 119:67 KJV)

Can each of us sincerely and honestly face our personal mirror and, though not necessarily in David's ways, but in our own, have lived this verse? Our human broken nature inclines us to wandering. And the Lord's kind, but stern chastening, refines those inclinations out of us. It is so very easy to look at the world around us and complain about how evil "They" have become. Ah, but it is painfully difficult to look in that mirror of Biblical teaching and acknowledge David's confession of our own straying.

How thankful we should be that we have just such a Lord and Savior, a "Good" and "Great" Shepherd, and, to use David's words, "My Shepherd." Instead of leaving us to wander, He kindly reminds, nudges, and occasionally chastens us to urge us to live close to Him and to His flock. (Song of Solomon 1:8 KJV) When we mirror this lesson and face choices or decisions about which we simply do not know the right and the clear way to go, our inclination is to strike out on our own, but the wise "Sheep" consciously chooses the path that stays close to the "Shepherd" and His flock. There is our greatest safety, and there we shall meet our own "Brother Bells" who bless us so richly. Lord help us to live our journey out in this manner.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

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A Permanent Shepherd and a Safe Fold

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. (Psalm 23:6 KJV 1900)

Every time I take the time to revisit Psalm 23 I learn more about the amazing goodness of "My Shepherd." David's conclusion is as rich and instructive as the body of the Psalm. "Surely," there can be no doubt or question in David's mind. Of all the stumbling moments David had in his life—and they were many—he lived with this confidence in his Shepherd, in the Lord.

Of the many bad examples David set for his family, he apparently set this good one. Notice how Solomon's words mirror this same strong confidence in the Lord.

In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge.
(Proverbs 14:26 KJV)

If we rightly view and perceive our God, our "Shepherd," we too join David and Solomon in this high trust of the Lord. When He stands beside us, or, as our Shepherd, watches over us, and we remain close to His side in the safety of His flock and His faith, we may rejoice in that confidence.

Goodness. "The pictograph is a picture of a basket, used to contain or surround something. The (Second image) is a picture of a tent or house. Combined these mean "surround the house". The house is surrounded by grace, beauty, love, health and prosperity, something that is functional." (Ancient Hebrew Pictogram Dictionary) If we accept this ancient pictograph meaning of the word, we understand that the Lord's goodness "Surrounds our house," our life. Despite all the troubles we face in life, for the moment setting aside the troubles we bring on ourselves—most of the ones we suffer—we may come in faith to realize how the Lord in goodness surrounds our lives and blesses us far above measure. The whole scenario of a shepherd and sheep ignores the scales of merit or no merit. The shepherd doesn't care for his sheep based on how they deserve to be cared for. He cares for them, knowing that they are too weak and short-sighted to wisely care for themselves, so he "Surrounds" them day and night to protect them from danger. His care is based on his devotion to their care and protection, not on how much they deserve—or don't deserve. The reality of our spiritual relationship with the Lord is similar. He regards us, loves us, and "Surrounds" our lives to protect and care for us based on His love for us, not based on how much we deserve His care, for we simply don't deserve it.

And mercy. Once again, the Ancient Pictograph Hebrew dictionary stirs good thoughts, "To bow the neck to someone as a sign of kindness." I suspect we've all struggled at times trying to find a clear and expressive definition of mercy. "Undeserved favor" is a common cliché that attempts to match the meaning, but, at its heart, "Mercy" is not at all based on merit or demerit. It seems that "Kindness" captures the idea of "Mercy" much better. The Lord chooses to show kindness toward His children, even though we often live up to David's "Dumb as sheep" symbolism.

The Lord showed us amazing mercy, "Kindness," by saving us. (Titus 3:5 KJV) He also shows us His abiding mercy throughout our lives. (Matthew 5:7 KJV, as we show "Mercy" to others, the Lord shows it to us), (Luke 1:49, 50, 54 KJV). In Romans 9:23, Paul describes all the Lord's chosen people as "**vessels of mercy**," made and designed to contain only mercy. How kind our "Shepherd" is!

"...**shall follow me**." The Ancient Hebrew Pictogram dictionary not only affirms our KJV word, but emphasizes the point, "...**pursue me**." The Lord's goodness and mercy are not casual companions of His people. They "Pursue" us and abide ever with us. As David beautifully wrote in Psalm 139:7-13 KJV), we cannot go anywhere in this whole universe where the Lord in goodness and mercy is not present with us.

Someone may well say, “But that all sounds too good. If this is true, why do I have so many troubles and pains in my life?” I can’t answer all your troubles and pains. However, as I ponder David’s “Shepherd” lesson and reflect on my personal life, I offer one point that all too often has explained my own troubles and pains. In the symbolism of a shepherd and his flock, David might remind us; a shepherd did not always protect wandering, rebellious sheep from themselves. Even with the best of shepherds (And we have just such a “Shepherd”), a sheep could wander away from the flock and find far more dangers than it could avoid. Most of my troubles and pains in life have been of my own making. That is, in fact, the reason for the leading thoughts of goodness and mercy, not the image of an uncaring, aloof Shepherd.

“...*all the days of my life.*” From birth to death, David found his safety and his security in his “Shepherd.” He could imagine no day or time in his life when his Shepherd’s goodness and mercy did not “Surround” him. As good as this seems, David uses this comforting truth only to introduce something far beyond it in our Shepherd’s care of His “Sheep,” His people.

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. David has walked us through every step imaginable in our lives and reminded us at each point of our Shepherd’s presence, protection, and care. Just when we thought he’d covered all the bases—nothing left—he takes us beyond our imagination with a simple three-letter word, “And.” It isn’t over yet!

I will dwell in the house of the Lord. Typically, an ancient shepherd outlived his sheep many times over. However, and all because “*The Lord is my shepherd,*” David, a symbolic “Sheep” in the Lord’s flock, rejoiced in the ultimate reality of his “Shepherd.” When we sing the favorite hymn, “Amazing Grace,” we sometimes sing the supplemental words, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun.” Well, my friend, you can also sing these words regarding your permanent status in the Lord’s “Flock.” And we can further sing after those ten thousand years in glory, “*The Lord is my Shepherd!*” To use David’s words, after those ten thousand years in glory, you shall still sing, “*I will dwell in the house of the Lord.*”

As much as we rejoice in the comforts of Psalm 23, in this glorious point, we may yet “Sell it short.” David marked this final verse with “...*all the days of my life.*” Then, to remind us that the end of our natural life is not the end of our life in the beloved “Flock” of our “Shepherd,” David adds this final truth. After we reach our end, we yet shall sing, “*I will dwell in the house of the Lord.*”

...*for ever.* There is no end to our Shepherd’s abiding care of His sheep. Everything in this life comes to an end, including ourselves in this world. But *the glory hymn of the ransomed shall never end.* Oh, it shall be transformed into a better tune, but we shall sing it “for ever.” Some of the Lord’s people in this life who dearly love the Lord and who rejoice to sing His praises have voices that simply do not repeat the notes of their favorite hymns. Despite their voices singing off-key, their hearts sing in beautiful harmony with the Lord’s redemption song. I vividly recall a dear old fellow I first met as a young “Pup” in my ministry. “Brother Bell” was a deacon and a devoted member of a church about fifty miles from where I grew up. The first time I attended that church I was sitting on the front “Amen” corner section bench, and Brother Bell, a dear saint I was yet to meet, sat near me. When the hymn service started, Brother Bell sang to the top of his

voice. No one who observed his face could doubt; this dear man loved the Lord with all his heart, and he rejoiced to sing His praises. However, dear, dear Brother Bell's voice didn't get the idea of singing. As the saying goes, he couldn't "Carry a tune in a basket." But that didn't hinder him. What his voice couldn't do, his heart made up in doing so well. My first reaction, I confess, was a bit critical. Surely, he knows he can't carry a tune. Why does he make so much noise when he knows he can't sing in tune? Ah, but no sooner than those thoughts surfaced in my mind, I felt righteous conviction from the Lord. I could hear this man's voice, but I was wholly deaf to his heart. And the Lord was hearing Brother Bell's heart melody and blessing Brother Bell richly. (Ephesians 5:19 KJV) Over time I got to know Brother Bell. He had a genuine heart for the Lord and His people. The Lord had blessed him with wisdom and grace above measure. I cherish the times I was allowed to sit quietly in the room with him and hear him tell some of the stories of his life in faith. He taught me much, including the priceless treasure of the melody of our hearts to the Lord. I love to hear well-disciplined voices sing beautiful four-part harmony in praises to the Lord, but, please folks, never do anything to discourage the dear Brother Bells of our congregations. While we hear that beautiful voice harmony, we cannot hear the heart melody that the Lord most treasures.

If singing praises to the Lord is part of what goes on in heaven with the Lord's redeemed, and I believe it is (Revelation 5:9 KJV), the dear Brother Bells in glory are singing to the top of their redeemed voices, and in perfect harmony, heart and voice, to their Lord and Savior. Honor those dear saints today by trying to see, and perhaps even on occasion to hear the harmony of their hearts. Take the time to sit in a room with them, to hear them tell of their sojourn of faith. If you listen carefully, you just might be blessed to hear a faint echo of heart-harmony rising past the ceiling to the Lord, and you shall be blessed for a lifetime by that moment. I know! I had that experience with dear Brother Bell.

But we must never forget David's last chapter in his inspired "Shepherd's Song." "***I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.***" Whatever we experience with Him today, and the closer we stay to the "***Footprints of the flock,***" (Song of Solomon 1:8 KJV) the more Brother Bells shall cross our paths, and the more we shall learn of our "Great," "Good," and "***My Shepherd.***" Ah, ***but the best is yet to come!***

Elder Joe Holder