# Tend My Sheep

## On Shepherds, Cocoons, and the Year Ahead

Rob Massie

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### What We Collect

We are at the end of a year, and it is hard to know exactly how to set the tone for what has gone in the past and what is coming up next. So I want to think in terms of beginnings.

We collect things over time. We need to collect the victories that we have had in Christ, but those are not always as easily remembered as the other things we collect. The grievances. The disappointments. The wrongs done to us. Those tend to live closer to the surface. They are what comes top of mind. They are what we ruminate on. And if we are not careful, if those collections are not healthy, they bring us down. Old ideas, old slights, repeating themselves, becoming a heavy burden.

That is why the blood of Christ and the new beginning we have in Jesus matter so much. Without forgiveness, without the receiving and the giving of forgiveness, what would we be? We would be holding up a ledger of wrongs done to us, while someone else holds a ledger of wrongs we did to them, and our name sits on someone's list, and theirs sits on ours. Thank God we have the ability both to receive and to give forgiveness. And the forgiveness we receive is not something we earn. Paul puts it this way:

> But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us . . . For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son . . . (Romans 5:8, 10)

If we were in a state of *enemy* relationship with God, and yet he took action to remedy that situation, what a powerful grace that is. The children of Israel were delivered from slavery before they ever received a single law on how to live. The deliverance was first; the law was second. And once you have been delivered, the law becomes, as Psalm 119 reads from cover to cover, a blessing. The law is not the basis of the relationship; it is the guidance for people who, having been delivered and saved, are now responding to God in faith. It is response. But the deliverance never stops being grace.

**Two Fingers on the Lip**

I will admit something. As a kid, when I knew a spanking was coming when we got home, I had my methods. I knew that if I could fall asleep in the back of the car, maybe my parents would forget what they had said. Nobody wants to spank a sleeping child. So I had my methods of getting out of debtor's prison.

Then I became a parent and saw it from the other side. One day one of my young daughters, she was maybe three or four, was talking treacherously to her sister in the next room, and I called out, "You don't talk to your sister that way. You come in here. I'm going to smack that mouth." Sometimes you say things in the heat of the moment. But by the time she walked around the corner, big alligator tears coming down her face; she was already in full repentance. Deep trouble with Papa, and she knew it.

And by the time she got to me, what was the point of executing vengeance? So as she walked up, I just put two fingers out and pressed them gently against her lip. And she burst into

tears: tears of repentance. That image has stayed with me ever since. Watching a heart that softens versus a heart that hardens. Doesn't our Father want to do the same thing? He wants to see character developed in his children. He wants us to behave like him. We are children of the Father; we are expected to display the character of the Father.

## The Heel-Holder Becomes Israel

Consider Jacob. His name in Hebrew literally means *heel-holder*, and in idiomatic Hebrew, calling someone a heel-holder was a way of saying they were going to take advantage of you. Jacob was born holding the heel of his twin brother. And his entire early life lived up to the name. He took advantage of Esau. He fled. He worked for his uncle Laban, and Laban showed Jacob what it felt like to be on the other end of the same trick. Laban repeatedly took advantage of Jacob, but God saw Jacob's labor and his situation, and somehow, by the end of those years, Jacob left a rich man.

Then Jacob has to come back and face his past. And the man who comes back to meet Esau is not the same man who fled. Something has shifted. The night before the meeting, Jacob wrestles with the angel until daybreak, and the angel touches his hip. From that day forward, Jacob walks differently: limping. His name is changed to Israel. And it is from that name that all of us read the Hebrew Scriptures: the children of Israel.

If you stay in any one place long enough, you will face your past. Everybody knows you. They saw you at fifteen. They saw you at twenty-five, Uber-confident that you knew everything about raising children. (At twenty-five I was so sure of myself that I thought I'd write a book on parenting. By thirty-five I was thinking, *let me sketch an outline*. By forty-five, *let me put it in pencil*. By fifty-five, *let someone else write the book*.) You learn a thing or two because you've seen a thing or two.

## Tell Them About Me

Ten years ago, when I took over the pastoring of this assembly, I asked the Lord, "What am I going to tell these people that they haven't already heard?" And what I felt him say was simple: *tell them about me*. If we will just stick to him, to Jesus, and to how that should inform the rest of life, that is sufficient. That is enough.

## Andrew at the Water

Look at how it began for the first disciples. John 1 takes us to the waters of baptism, where John the Baptist is baptizing. Andrew is there, along with another follower of John. The whole region was streaming out to John, Mark says "all of Jerusalem," so much so that the religious leaders came out to investigate. A lot of people got baptized that day. But when John baptizes Jesus, something in *that* moment causes Andrew to stop and say, "That was different."

Andrew goes and tells his brother Peter. Peter comes. They tell their friend Philip. Philip goes and tells Nathanael. As Nathanael approaches, Jesus says:

"'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!' Nathanael said to Him, 'How do You know me?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you'" (John 1:47–48).

Whatever God revealed to his Son at that moment, it triggered something in Nathanael. And then Jesus says something stunning to him:

"You will see greater things than these . . . Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:50–51).

That is a direct citation of Genesis 28: the ladder Jacob saw at Bethel, the angels ascending and descending. Jesus is saying: *I am that ladder.* The Son of Man (his favorite self-

designation, drawn from Daniel 7) is the place where heaven and earth are joined. The sons of Israel (Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael) had just found the One in whom Jacob's promise, that in his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed, was about to be fulfilled. They followed him for three and a half years, and at the end of those years they were a different kind of men.

## "Do You Love Me More Than These?"

By the end of John, Peter has failed publicly. He has denied Jesus three times. Then Jesus, risen from the dead, sits with him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and asks the question three times, once for each denial:

> "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" . . . And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep." (John 21:15–17)

Three commands. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. There is a feeding and a tending that has to come from men and women who love the Lord. That is why we must have a multi-generational church. We must have children who have voices. We must have young men and young women, families, middle-aged people, elderly people. Without that range, how do we obey the mandate to tend and to feed? We have been given that mandate, and we are not relieved of it.

## The Word for Rule

Go back to Genesis 1. When God created humankind, he gave them dominion, the original word means *rule*, over the birds of the air and the fish of the sea and the beasts of the

field. We have all seen that word abused. People assume it means “the resources of the earth are mine to extract.” But every time the Hebrew word for *rule* is used in relation to God himself, it is always God *caring for, restoring, bringing order out of disorder, settling what is unsettled, feeding and protecting his people*. Our rulership was meant to be of the same kind, because the creation is not ours. We have just been brought along for the ride. We are vice-regents of the true King, brought in to help him minister.

Genesis 2 then uses two further words for the calling. God places the man in the garden “to tend it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). The word for *tend* comes from the same root as the word for *shepherd,* the kind of rule the psalmist had in mind in Psalm 23. *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want . . . Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* That is the kind of rule. *Tend* and *keep* mean to enter the garden of God and create a space that is safe, to manage things, to keep things, to make a place where life can thrive.

**“Woe to the Shepherds of Israel”**

Israel did not do that. The kings did not. The priests did not. So when Adam fell, Genesis 3 says the ground itself was cursed, the ground would no longer yield bountifully; thorns and thistles would come up under our hands. Our sin is not private and quiet. It has cosmic impact. (You may have heard of the butterfly effect, the idea that a butterfly flapping its wings somewhere in Kansas contributes to a hurricane in the Philippines. Something seemingly small, with effects far beyond what is visible.) When sin entered the world, the whole creation was burdened by it. Cain is told the next chapter that “sin lies at the door,” crouching like a lion. Something had happened. The beasts that Adam had peacefully named were no longer at peace.

And Isaiah, looking around in his own day, says: This is all wrong. This is not how it was meant to be. So in Isaiah 11 he reaches for a different image:

> There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. (Isaiah 11:1–2)
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> And then the picture of what that Branch will produce in the world:
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> The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain. (Isaiah 11:6–9)

Just look at this past year. The losses. The people who have passed. The hurt and brokenheartedness. You don't have to look very far to see systemic addiction, overdoses, animosity between people who live in the same community and went to the same schools but now hate one another. This is not the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the *answer* to all that. And the answer in Isaiah 11 is a Branch out of Jesse, a Shepherd-King who comes to set things right.

By the time the prophets reach the exile, Ezekiel says it bluntly. The shepherds had failed. The kings had failed. The priests had failed. So God speaks through Ezekiel:

> Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel . . . "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor

> bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field . . .” (Ezekiel 34:2–5)

Notice the double imagery. In one frame the shepherds neglect the sheep, and the beasts come and devour them. In another frame the shepherds *themselves* are the ones with the sheep in their teeth. “With force and cruelty you have ruled them.” That word *ruled* is the same word from Genesis 1, but it has been turned against the people it was meant to serve.

And then God’s response:

> “Therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord! As I live,” says the Lord God, “surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock became food for every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd . . .” “Therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord!” Thus says the Lord God: “Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep . . .” (Ezekiel 34:7–10)

And then the great promise:

> Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries . . . I will feed them in good pasture . . . they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. (Ezekiel 34:11–14)

And then this:

"I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them: My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and My servant David a prince among them" (Ezekiel 34:23–24).

Notice the word *prince*. Not *king*. The Hebrew word here is gentler, less authoritarian. Israel had had its belly full of bad kings. What it needed was someone who would come and be among them what God had originally called them to be: a shepherd. "My servant David, a prince among them."

And when God sent his Son, what Andrew saw at the water, what Peter saw, what Philip saw, what Nathanael experienced, was a Prince among them. Someone who would be that for them. Jesus fed them with the Word. He sometimes challenged them with the words of God: "You have heard it said, but I say to you . . ." He took the law of Moses (which Paul rightly says is holy and just and good) and said, "I have not come to abolish it, but to fulfill it." In him is the completion of the law. As we begin to dwell in him, we become a fulfillment of the law.

**A Garden of Renown**

Listen to where Ezekiel goes from there:

"I will make a covenant of peace with them, and cause wild beasts to cease from the land; and they will dwell safely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods" (Ezekiel 34:25).

Sleep in the woods. To Israel and to all the ancient Near East, the woods were where the demons lived. (In the Greco-Roman world, that was where the satyrs and the spirits dwelt.) The woods were not safe. But the people of God *get to sleep in the woods*. They are no longer afraid of the wilderness.

How does God cause the wild beasts to cease? He raises up men and women who become protectors and guards, who prevent hardship at the edges so the flock can rest in the middle.

Some of those beasts are inside us; some are uncontrolled forces in the world. Either way, the call is the same: to feed, to tend, to guard.

> I will make them and the places all around My hill a blessing; and I will cause showers to come down in their season; there shall be showers of blessing. Then the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield her increase. They shall be safe in their land . . . Thus they shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are My people. (Ezekiel 34:26–27, 30)

And a few verses later:

> "So they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the Garden of Eden'" (Ezekiel 36:35).

God wants to undo desolation. What caused desolation? Irresponsible leadership. Not enough shepherds, not enough people to guide and guard, not enough people who were feeding the flock. God wants us to *be* that people.

## "Among Yourselves Men Will Arise"

Paul saw the same risk in his own day. He had spent years pouring himself out for the church at Ephesus, and he knew he was leaving them for the last time. Listen to his charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:

> Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

> Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. (Acts 20:26–30)

Paul's deepest concern was not external opposition, though he names the savage wolves. His deepest concern was the *internal* drift. "Among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves." The very pattern Ezekiel had seen six centuries earlier: men who, instead of feeding the flock, would have the flock in their own teeth, drawing them away to themselves in some power struggle.

This is why a single-pastor model (one man at the top, one man carrying everything) is not the model the New Testament gives us. The flock is safer when there are many tending hands and many feeding voices. In the next several weeks I will be laying out, formally, what I believe the next chapter of leadership in this assembly should look like: calling out men and women whose hearts are *for the people*, who would respond to Jesus' question, "Do you love Me more than these?" with a yes that means something. It takes a heart whole-heartedly devoted to the Lord to be able to devote ourselves in service to others. If it is pride, if it is arrogance, if it is anything other than love, it scatters the sheep. But if it is done with a heart of love, the church is built up. There is safety. There is protection. Many people can come and share, take roles and responsibility, so that the people of the church can thrive.

We are all sheep. We are all kings. We are all priests. But at the same time, we have to have shepherds who guide and help and protect. The one Shepherd at the center of it, the one who, like David, became a shepherd that solved the problem of the beasts and brought a Garden of Eden where there had only been wilderness, pours out his Spirit on us. And with the Spirit come gifts. And those gifts, Paul says in Ephesians 4, are "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry." Everybody works in the church of Jesus Christ. Everybody.

## Mingle the Wine

If we will make one resolution as we go forward, let it be this: *to be together as much as we can be together*. We have a Sunday morning. We have a Wednesday night. We are interspersing additional worship gatherings throughout the year. There will be opportunities: the community coming here, us going elsewhere. We have to mingle our wine.

> Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars; she has slaughtered her meat, she has mixed her wine, she has also furnished her table . . . "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed." (Proverbs 9:1–2, 4–5)

Wisdom mingles her wine, sets her table, and calls. Don't you want to be that kind of place? There are hungry, thirsty people out there who have been scattered, harassed, sheep without a shepherd. We can hardly throw a rock without finding someone who needs what God has been helping us with.

## The Cocoon in the Jar

Someone shared this with me at the close of the service, and it bears repeating. He had once found a large cocoon in his yard. Curious about what would emerge, he put it in a jar. He forgot about it for a while. When he finally remembered to check, the butterfly had come out, but its wings were deformed. The lid had confined it. There hadn't been room for the wings to expand.

No lids. No constraints. God is calling us not into confinement but into the free movement of his Spirit.

And yet there is a kind of order that gives us *more* freedom, not less. I told a story a few weeks ago that I'll repeat for those who weren't here. A study was done at a California school

where the playground was bordered by a tall fence. Educators worried that the fence was psychologically constraining the children, so they removed it. What they observed was the opposite of what they had expected: with the fence gone, the children confined themselves to the middle of the playground. They wouldn't play near the edges. The fence had not constrained them; it had freed them. Once it was gone, they sensed the open boundary as danger and pulled back. The fence went back in, and the children played all the way to its edge.

There are psychological constraints. The world is bound by them. But the freedom we have in Christ through the Spirit is infinite. If we will respond appropriately to God's grace, not by trying to keep the law as the basis of relationship, but by responding to what God has *already done* in our lives by the Spirit, we will find freedom we have never had before. We will think, "I can't go to that thing, I can't go to that place." Yes, you can, as long as you bring the light of Jesus everywhere you go, as long as you minister light and grace. You can go almost anywhere. Just be careful that the brokenness of your own spirit isn't there with you, because the devil knows how to shackle and bind and control.

Balaam thought he was just wandering around the wilderness, doing his work. He looked down at Israel encamped below him and saw not chaos but order: well-laid-out tents, the people of God arranged around him at the center. Tried to curse them, and the curses came out as blessings. The Tower of Babel went up to heaven trying to make a name. Genesis 12, the very next chapter, says of Abraham, "You barren old man, you barren old wife; *I* will make a name for you." What seems like constraint to God is actual liberation for his people.

There are cocoons all around us that need our daily attention. There is a metamorphosis that needs to arise in us through the Spirit, a transformation that is impossible without him. We cannot become what God has called us to without the Spirit.

That is what we are walking into. As we move forward, God will help us answer the almost-unanswerable questions. And for every heart that has been stony, that has resisted his grace and mercy, if it will turn to him, he will give it a heart of flesh, put a new spirit in it, and cause it to walk in his ways. It is only by walking belligerently against God that we find ourselves distant from him in these broken states. The way home is the same way it has always been: turn, and he will gather.