

## **Four Flocks**

### *A Parable*

One day the Chief Shepherd summoned one of his trusted servants. “Go to that city just yonder,” he said, “and find my lost sheep. It is time to bring them back into the safety of my sheep pen. They have been wandering for a long time and are ready now to listen to my voice.”

The servant quickly obeyed his Master’s command. At great personal risk, he went into the dark corners of the city to hunt for the lost sheep. Some were sick and about ready to die. He showed compassion on them and nursed them back to health. When they were strong again, they helped him find other lost sheep.

Some of the sheep were starving. Since they had no Shepherd, they didn’t know where to find good pasture. They wandered about, roaming here and there, never knowing where they might find something nourishing to eat. The Master’s servant brought them samples of good food and promised to lead them into the Good Shepherd’s feeding grounds. Some of the starving sheep believed him and began to grow fat on the Shepherd’s provisions.

After a time the servant had found 100 sheep who were willing to be led by the Chief Shepherd. These he gathered into one flock. He took them into green pastures to be nourished by the pure food the Shepherd provided. Crystal-clear streams flowed through the pasture, refreshing the sheep and giving them abundant life. While they rested, the servant would play his flute. Sometimes he would sing praises to the Shepherd, and the sheep would be comforted.

The sheep learned to distinguish the voice of the Shepherd from the voice of the wolves who were always on the edge of the pasture waiting for some unwary lamb to get too close.

There were other servants of the Shepherd who envied this flock of 100 sheep. They envied the servant who had successfully brought the flock together. They said to themselves and to one another, “Are we not also servants of the same Shepherd? Should we not also be leading a flock?” One, who was named MiTu, said, “There must be good potential in that city. I will go and serve the Master there.”

MiTu saw the dark corners of the city and became afraid. “Those places are dangerous,” he thought. “It would be better for me to stay here in the light so I can see the enemy coming.” Occasionally he would find a lost sheep who was sick, but he was afraid to go near lest the sickness be contagious.

In the distance MiTu saw some sheep who looked rather scraggly, as though they weren’t getting enough to eat. He thought, “If only they would come to me! I have food enough here for all.” But he did not take the food to them. When he saw sheep who were being deceived by wolves, he felt sorry for them. “Ah, it’s too bad those sheep are so dumb. Can’t they understand that there is poison in that food?” At first he made an effort to expose the wolves, but when the wolves turned on him, he ran away.

MiTu became frustrated. “Great Shepherd,” he complained one day, “I want to serve you in your pasture. But I have no sheep!”

MiTu began getting acquainted with the 100 sheep who had already been gathered. At first he was happy in the company of the first servant. After a while, though, he became dissatisfied. He began making suggestions to the sheep. “Don’t you ever get tired of that flute? The harp is much better for praising the Shepherd. I could even teach you to play the harp yourself!” Some of the sheep began to think that it certainly would be better to have a harp than a flute. MiTu formed these sheep into a new flock. The sheep were so charmed by the music of the harp that they failed to notice that the food wasn’t quite as tasty in the new pasture.

One day another servant of the Shepherd arrived in the city. He had studied many years at Good Shepherd’s Seminary and could understand the language of many varieties of sheep. He was concerned that some of the Shepherd’s sheep might not be getting a balanced diet.

One time he was invited to serve the evening meal to the sheep of the first servant’s flock. “That was delicious!” they all agreed, “a real treat!” Some of them began to think, “Wouldn’t it be great if we could feast like that all the time? Let’s invite this man to lead us.” But there were other sheep who were loyal to the first servant and didn’t want to have someone else lead them. So a number left and formed another flock. They were so happy at the rich food they were getting that they didn’t notice that the presence of the Good Shepherd seemed to be missing. Once there was a young ewe who began to doubt they had made a good decision, but no one wanted to listen to her. “Look at how the work of the Shepherd is expanding!” they protested. “There used to be only one flock in this city. Now there are three!”

Finally a fourth servant came to the city. He looked at the three flocks and said, “You are spending far too much time lying around in your pastures. You should be out spreading the Good News of the Shepherd. I will teach you how to do it.”

Some of the sheep in MiTu’s flock felt convicted. “Yes, we have been lazy. We have enjoyed playing our music, but now it is time for us to work. Our leader has failed us. Telling the Good News is much more important than playing the harp.” So they left MiTu’s flock and formed a new flock around the fourth servant. They began spreading the Good News to sheep who had already been rescued. Once they found a lost ewe with her twin lambs and invited her into the flock. But at the same time, one of the rams died. Two of the other ewes were married to rams in another city, so the total number of sheep in that flock didn’t get any larger.

After a long time, the Chief Shepherd sent out a summons to all of his servants to appear before his throne. He asked them to report on the condition of their flocks. He began with the last.

“Servant Number Four,” he called. “How many of my sheep are in your flock? How are they doing under your care?”

“I have 23 sheep now,” Servant Number Four answered. “They are real workers. Every week some of them go outside our pasture to find sheep to bring back. I have impressed upon them their need to follow your Great Commission.”

The Great Shepherd went on to Servant Number Three. “I have been faithful to preach your Word,” he boasted. “Every week my 27 sheep—I mean *your* 27 sheep—feast at a banquet of the richest food.”

MiTu was next. “Surely you have heard the beautiful praises coming from the 30 sheep in my flock,” he responded. All of them are skilled in playing the harp and singing.

At last the Shepherd spoke to the first servant. There was concern in his eyes. “What about you? How is your flock doing?”

The first servant hesitated. “My Lord,” he said, “I’m not sure what’s wrong. I worked very hard when you first sent me to the city. I found 100 of your lost sheep. Some were sick, some were dying. I fed them the food you told me to give them and nursed them back to health. For a while, everything seemed to be going well. Then some of them wanted greener pastures. Some didn’t like to listen to my flute any more. And now, it seems as though every time we find a lost sheep, one of those already in the pasture wants to go away. Only 20 remain.” He humbly hung his head. “I’m sorry, my Lord.”

The Shepherd looked intently at his four servants. “Let’s summarize the condition of my flocks in the city. At first there were only lost sheep there. I sent my servant to find them and minister to them. Soon there was a flock with 100 sheep. Now, after many years, there are four servants with four flocks—and a total of 100 sheep.” The Shepherd paused and was quiet.

The four servants looked at one another, and then again at the Shepherd. Suddenly they stepped back, startled.

Why was the Shepherd crying?

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