

**THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR**

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*Straying Sheep*  
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Dear radio friends,

**W**e are sheep. So we learn in many different passages of the Bible. In fact, if we were to take special note of Scripture in this regard, we would find that it uses this figure quite often. It does so in order to describe many things about us as individuals, as Christ's church, and even in order to make clear something about Christ Himself. The Bible speaks of the church as the flock of God. It speaks of the sheep as well as the lambs. It speaks of Christ as the Good Shepherd, and also of the under-shepherds that He appoints to care for His flock. The Bible teaches us of the green pastures that we are led to by our Shepherd. But it also speaks of how often we go astray. Christ Himself teaches us of the comfort His sheep can have because it is He who preserves them unto everlasting life.

All these aspects of our sin and salvation are depicted in Scripture in several different places using the figure of

the sheep. It does so also in this passage that we are going to consider today: Isaiah 53:6. Notice: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

It must be well understood that the prophet Isaiah is not addressing everyone in this world when he speaks regarding the "we" in our text. In other words, when Isaiah says in our text: "all *we* like sheep have gone astray; *we* have turned every one to his own way," and so on, he is not speaking there of every person in this world. It is true that every one in this world has strayed away deeply into sin and unbelief. But Isaiah does not address everyone in the world. He is speaking here in particular to the nation of Israel, the church of the Old Testament. Besides this, if God laid upon Christ the iniquity of every one in this world, then no one would stand under condemnation, but every one would be saved. It is a simple fact, therefore, that Isaiah addresses the church.

And as such, he says, “All *we* like sheep have gone astray.”

Now, it is true that when Isaiah speaks of us as sheep he limits this comparison to what sheep are apt to do as sheep, that is, stray from the shepherd. But there is more to this figure than what first, perhaps, meets the eye. God’s people are spoken of here as sheep. The question is: Why this particular figure of sheep? Why are we known here, and really in all of Scripture, as sheep? The answer is: Because of the perfect analogy there is between the church of Jesus Christ and a flock of sheep.

The Psalms testify beautifully to the truth that God’s people are, indeed, the sheep of God’s pasture. We read of that in Psalm 100:3 and Psalm 95:7. And let us not forget the well known 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which begins: “The Lord is my Shepherd.” Scripture refers to the church as a whole, organically, as the flock of God. Together we make up the sheep of God. And not only does Scripture refer to the Old Testament church in this way, but to the New Testament church as well. You know, some men create a division between the Old Testament people of God and the church of the New Testament. Scripture does not do this. The church of the Old

and New Testaments alike make up the one flock of God. The people of God of all ages are God’s sheep.

This figure, therefore, is used throughout Scripture to show the unique relationship that exists between God and His people. And that is why, too, we say that the sheep in the verse we consider today do not include every person in this world. God’s people are His sheep. Jesus says of those sheep in John 10: “I know my sheep; and I am known of mine. My sheep hear my voice and I give unto them eternal life.” That is very exclusive. God as the Shepherd stands before His sheep. He has chosen them to be His own. And He therefore loves them. In fact, God has loved and chosen His sheep from all eternity. He has called them by name. He has, by His grace, placed those sheep into His flock. In this life He leads them and protects them and preserves them as His own. Just as a shepherd guides his flock, He calls to those sheep. And we, the sheep, follow Him, just as a flock of sheep hear the voice of their master and follow him. He loves them and they love him. There is no one they love more or trust more than their own good shepherd. And this is true of us, just as really as it is true of a flock of sheep. So it is not strange

that Scripture uses this figure to describe us as God's people.

Now, as we mentioned, it is not this relationship that stands on the foreground in this verse. Isaiah speaks of us as sheep in order to illustrate a *flaw* in us, a particular sin problem that we have in our lives. And that sin problem is the fact that we are so apt to stray from God and His Word and commandments. You see, sheep are not very smart creatures. In fact, sheep are downright foolish. They have it very good within the confines of the flock, under the watchful care of the shepherd. The shepherd protects the sheep from wild animals and from thieves who would steal them away. The shepherd sees to it that the sheep are properly fed and nourished. He leads them into green pastures and beside still waters so that they can graze and drink in safety. Within the confines of the flock is found peace, happiness, and security. If a sheep had any kind of understanding, he would know that in the flock is contained everything he needs for a good life.

But sheep are stupid. They are. They are foolish. They lack contentment, it seems. And every opportunity they find, they stray. It seems to be in the very nature of a sheep to stray. Where?

Who knows! Just so he can get out of the flock and strike out on his own. And he chafes when the shepherd, with his staff, prods him back into the fold. He kicks against the pricks. Once admonished and back in the flock, he knows he is the happiest there. But it is not long and that sheep loses his contentment and starts to wander again. He strays. So naïve is that sheep that he takes no note of where he wanders. He does not look to see the way he wandered so that he can find the flock back again in some way. He just meanders away until he finds himself totally lost. The only way he will get back to the flock is if the good shepherd makes a point of going out and seeking him.

Not only that, but where he wanders often leads him into dangerous places. Do not forget, the bear and the wolf are around, always waiting to devour the helpless sheep. And the sheep, totally oblivious to this danger, will often wander right into the clutches of these wild beasts. They are foolish. It is in their very nature. It is ingrained in them.

Now, Isaiah tells us to take a hard look at the example, and then, as believers, to take a hard look at ourselves. You are those sheep, God tells us in this verse. The same na-

ture that is in the sheep is in us. Ingrained in our natures, in our sinful flesh, is this tendency to stray. All we like sheep have gone astray.

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The nation of Israel in the days of Isaiah had, as a whole, strayed from God. This was true as far as her individual citizens were concerned too. Everyone had turned away from God and was wandering about in sin and rebellion. So these words of Isaiah came to the flock of the church, the flock of Israel at that time, and declared that they, as sheep, had strayed. Isaiah, in this passage, stresses both the organic as well as the individual straying that was going on. He does that in the two phrases of this verse. First phrase: “All we like sheep have gone astray”—all of us together, as a whole, have strayed from Jehovah, he says. And then in the second phrase: “We have turned every one to his own way”—each of us has turned to his own way, and each of us has strayed individually from God.

Such is what, so often, characterizes the church of Jesus Christ today. On the

one hand, each of us must recognize that it is in our own flesh, our own sinful nature, to stray from God and His precepts. Every time we sin, we stray. Every time we violate God’s will for us, we are straying away from the presence of the shepherd. And we fail to see just how foolish we are when we do stray. We are the flock of the living God who has chosen us as His sheep. And as long as we remain under His watchful care, we are safe and secure. There is safety to be found within the fold, that is, within the confines of the church. God sees to it that our needs are taken care of. He leads us and directs us by His Word in right paths, paths that lead to life, peace, and joy. While under the eye of God we are protected from our enemies, who would seek to lure us from God and pull us down to hell.

But we are foolish sheep. And that foolishness is rooted in the principle of depravity or sin that is still found in our flesh. The upshot of our foolishness is that we stray. We so often stray. Where? Who knows! There are so many and varied possibilities of straying in this world. Who can begin to know where we go? The sinfulness of this

present world appeals to our natures. It lures us away from God and the sheepfold and into the wilds of unbelief. You know, the strange part of it is, we know the danger that lurks out there. We know it is out there, and yet we just need to taste of it for ourselves.

All we like sheep have gone astray. Oh, how we stray!

If only we could sit back and evaluate ourselves to see what we look like

|| *All we like sheep  
have gone astray.* ||

in God's sight! I mean, when we evaluate the sheep, we could almost laugh at the sheep when they simply wander off from the flock and into the wilds. How foolish of them. Cannot they see what they are doing? How foolish are we, oh sheep of God's pasture? How foolish you and I can be.

What really strikes me about this passage is this: How pointed it is when describing you and me. Isaiah tells us that "we have turned every one to his own way." What a vivid description of us as far as our sinful flesh is concerned. Every time we sin, we deliberately turn away from the mark of God's law and word and aim our lives in another direction. God's Word is so, so clear! It tells us how we are to live. It

tells us what is right doctrine. It is a sheep's goad. But when we hear that word, then our flesh kicks against the pricks. And, for some absurd reason, we think our own way is better than God's. We turn away from His ways that are righteous and true, and we think that *our* way is better. When we stray, it is only because we would rather do what is right in our own eyes than what is right in God's eyes. We can do that as individuals so often in our lives.

We can even do that as a flock, as churches. We fail to see what God's Word clearly teaches us and we turn away from it and we seek the lie rather than the truth.

You see how much like sheep we are? God tells us what we must do. And we say, "No, God, I think that if I do it this way it is better for me." So we get ourselves into a bind in doing it our way. Then, you would think that we would turn back to God again, but we find that we are lost. And we, in hardness, refuse to turn back. For that reason, too, we think that we know best how to get ourselves out of the trouble and heartache we have gotten ourselves into. The only way that we return to the pasture, the only way that we come back into the sheepfold

of God, is when, by God's grace He goes out and gets us and brings us back. That is our sin. That is our sinfulness.

In fact, in this passage of God's Word that we are considering, that sin is called "iniquity." That word refers to the depravity of our natures. We have in our nature, in our flesh, the horrible depravity and the sinfulness of unbelief. We must see that concerning ourselves. We are filled, in our flesh, with iniquity. That is how we are described. It is that iniquity that we must be warned against, so that we are aware of the tendency in us to stray.

When we are aware of that iniquity in us, then we also are constant in seeking God's care and strength to keep us from straying. You see, because of that iniquity, guilt lies upon us. And because of that guilt, punishment falls on us too. In other words, what this passage teaches us is that, not only are we sinful and corrupt, but because of that sinfulness we also become guilty before God. And that, too, we must be fully aware of. Sin makes us guilty before God and therefore worthy of punishment. We deserve, you and I as sheep, to be left out there in the wilds and to be destroyed, because of our hard-

ness of hearts, because of that sinful flesh in us that enjoys straying from God. We deserve to perish everlastingly in hell. In and of ourselves we deserve that, because such guilt makes us deserving of eternal death.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and this iniquity has made us guilty before the righteous God of heaven and earth. But hear the Word of God, and let each one of us humbly approach our God in sorrow and in repentance rather than remaining foolish in our pride and rebellion—because then, you see, we hear the comfort that the Word of God in this passage gives to you and me in the very last part of the verse: "The LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." That cannot refer to any other person than Jesus Christ Himself. Isaiah 53 is Messianic in character. It speaks of Christ. The Lord has laid on Christ the iniquity of us all.

Do you hear that? God has laid on Christ the depravity and the sin and the guilt of us all. All of us? Yes, sheep of God, *all* of us. That is where we make our boast—in God. He is the LORD, or Jehovah, the faithful covenant God, the God who remembers His oath that he swore to our fathers,

the God who is merciful and gracious. Jehovah has taken our iniquity, not merely our individual sins, mind you, but our very sinfulness itself, and laid it upon Jesus Christ. He who knew no sin became sin for us. He who Himself had no **g u i l t**, since He was perfectly righteous and holy, was given our guilt. God substituted Him in our place.

So it is that all that sin that was ours prior to our regeneration, but also that sin that we continue to commit in our lives, is cast, by God, on the shoulders of Jesus Christ. And in that we see the wonder of God's grace, because we know that Christ bore the burden of our sin and guilt and punishment. In doing so, He paid the price for our iniquities and our guilt. Though, even now, our sins are as scarlet, they are washed in the precious blood of Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd. And the penalty of our sin has been taken away.

What a gracious God! How good it is that we are the sheep of God's pasture! He loves us and He cares for us. He loves

His sheep so much that He sent His only begotten Son into this world to save them. Amazing grace! It is a grace that has saved and goes on saving us to the very end. What a Good Shepherd we serve!

Let us pray together.

O Lord our God, our Good Shepherd, we come unto Thee in the name of

our Lord Jesus Christ because we see in Him Thy faithfulness to us Thy sheep. How often, Father, do we stray away from Thee. How often we sin. How often we are allured to the ways of the wicked world around us. If it were not for Thy grace and Thy mercy towards us, we would perish in our sin. But Thou art a God who is gracious and Thou hast taken our sin and its guilt, and Thou hast laid it upon the shoulders of our Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and He has borne away our iniquities and guilt. We belong to Thee and we are thankful for that great gift of salvation. Bless us by the Word that we have heard today that it might lead and guide us in the way everlasting. For Thy name's sake we pray, Amen.

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