

Acts 20:28 “...shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood...”

Have you ever looked into the cost of shepherding sheep? Over the years, we have looked at what it takes to care for sheep through Tim Kellerman’s classic book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. But if you really wanted to get a start, what would it take, from a financial perspective, to raise a flock?

The website *Homesteading Hero* has put together a guide for those looking to embrace such a pastoral pursuit.¹ After lots of advice on where to purchase them, what to look for, how to determine the right breed for you, and a host of other informative nuggets, you might be surprised to find that a typical sheep will run you anywhere from \$200-500. Lambs would be on the low end of the spectrum. Older adult ewes would be next (they don’t have as many breeding years left). Prime adult ewes would be higher still. And finally, healthy and genetically strong rams come in at around \$500 if you wish to purchase. (Though, for the beginner shepherd it is suggested that you make use of your local rent-a-ram provider.)

Of course, this is just the initial purchase. It is assumed that you are putting sheep on grazing land that you already own. (Pastureland for rent or purchase, would, of course, raise the bar considerably.) But if using your own land, you can expect to shell out just over \$50 per head, per year. This includes winter feeding, supplements, and medicine, and the like. Then, depending on your purposes for keeping sheep, you can expect to get about a \$20 per year return on your investment. A sheep typically lives from 10-12 years.

So, from a purely financial perspective, a sheep looks like this: Say \$400 up front for a high-quality prime, 2-year-old ewe. You’ll spend about \$600 over its lifetime to care for it. And you can expect about \$200 back to offset the cost. In other words, if you went out and bought the sheep today, at the end of ten years, you’ll have lost \$800.

Now, why would anybody buy a sheep...much less purchase a sheep with blood, as Paul describes in our text for today? Obviously, there’s more to all of this than meets the rectangular-pupiled sheep’s eye. In fact, there is something more abundant, more profound than any of us sheep could possibly imagine. And as we, by God’s grace, through faith, delve into the unimaginable this morning, please, join me in prayer...

It sounds a bit like today: protests turned to rioting, political manipulations, the tragic death of a young man, fear and uncertainty for the future. But we’re talking about the 1st century A.D., the time leading up to our text for today, not the headlines for today.

The Apostle Paul is on the return leg of his Third Missionary journey. This four-year journey began in Antioch in about 53 A.D. He travelled from Antioch looking to visit and encourage established churches along the way through Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. Paul did so, as planned, arriving in Ephesus on the Western coast. He spent 2 years talking with religious leaders, reasoning with philosophers, proclaiming the gospel, performing miracles, affirming believers, and embarrassing false teachers.

One of the more striking events of these days was the situation of some Jewish priests who were going around claiming to cast out demons in the names of Jesus and Paul. On one occasion, the demon acknowledged Jesus and Paul, but denied the authority of the copy-cat priests. The possessed man gave them such a thrashing

that they ran from the house stripped and severely beaten. This incident, along with the preaching, reasoning, and healing that God was working through Paul, all combined to cause a level of fear and awe among the people.

But as you well know, fear often leads people to act in threatening ways. As the silversmiths of Ephesus, the creators of pagan Greek temple trinkets, saw their livelihood dwindling away, they decided that they needed to address this whole Christianity issue. Their protest turned to rioting in which they violently seized some Christians at hand, and brought them before the local magistrate. Paul wanted to step in, but the riot was so violent that the Christian leaders feared for Paul's life. In the end, God used the political pressures of Roman peace and stability to break up the crowd.

Calm was restored, but it was shortly thereafter that Paul headed for Macedonia. After likely spending time in Philippi, he went on to Greece. It was during this visit, specifically in Corinth, that he wrote his great letter to the Romans. But once again, plots were made against Paul's life and he set out to return to Jerusalem.

He went back via Macedonia, crossing over to Troas in Asia Minor, where he met with the church there. The believers gathered that Sunday for worship, Lord's supper, and fellowship. Paul had so much to share, so much encouragement to give, that the fellowship lasted all day and long into the night. One young man, sitting in a window, fell asleep as Paul went on and on. In his sleep, the young man fell out the window, falling three stories to his death below. But Paul raced down to the young man, stretched himself out over the body, and raised the young man from the dead. Paul then went back to preaching...until daybreak. (This is why, since then, most worship spaces are on the ground floor...just kidding!)

You see, Paul was feeling the urgent need to get going on his return trip. But he had lots to share. The Spirit had revealed that Paul would continue to suffer for the sake of the Name of Jesus, that he would face challenges in Jerusalem, but no specifics. So Paul called the Elders – or as we would know them, the pastors – serving the congregations of greater Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. (Paul was in such a hurry to get going that he didn't want to be waylaid by a personal visit to Ephesus). There in Miletus, assuming that he would not see these dear brothers again, he gave a kind of spiritual last will and testament. Among his words are those of our text for today. Again, ***Always keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.*** ²⁹ ***I know that after my departure savage wolves, who will not spare the flock, will come in among you.*** ³⁰ ***Even from your own group men will rise up, twisting the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.*** ³¹ ***Therefore be always on the alert! Remember that for three years, night and day, I never stopped warning each one of you with tears.***

Have you ever been left with advice like this? And I don't mean from a spiritual perspective. I mean in general. It would be something like this: Thanks for house sitting for me. I appreciate that your willing to look after my house while I'm in Europe. Just so you know, I might not come back. But you still need to take care things. And by the way, I have this neighbor that can't stand me. He always tries to take my stuff, set the house on fire, and otherwise cause problems. Watch out for him. And if anything happens, just deal with it. OK, then. I'm off!

And in a way, that's what it felt like for those Elders, like Paul was giving them this essential task, anticipating the worst possible

outcome, but hey, you can handle it. God's blessings on all that! So long!

But if you look closely, you'll see a key phrase that makes all the difference: *Always keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock* (now here it is) *in which the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.*

When I talked about buying a sheep before, it didn't seem worth it. I said that there must be something more. And there is. Over her lifetime, a ewe will likely give birth to 20 surviving lambs. They, in turn, give birth to more, etc. Within a few years, the flock has not only prodigiously grown, it provides a level of land management service to the homestead by controlling overgrowth in pastureland, it provides an income well beyond its purchase price through sale of animals, selling of wool, and the butchering of meat.ⁱⁱ All in all, if you have the pastureland and outbuildings, a profitable business.

And that's...sheep. In our text, Paul is talking about actual souls. Surely, souls are worth more than sheep. And they are. Or, are they? To be accurate, a prime sheep may be worth \$400, but according to our sinful nature, we are worth nothing. As Paul quotes to the Romans, *There is no one who is righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands. There is no one who searches for God. They all turned away; together they became useless. There is no one who does what is good; there is not even one.* (Romans 3:10-12) And yet, God has done the unimaginable: *he purchased [his flock] with his own blood!* So unimaginable, so deep is

God's love, so *profound*, that, even though it cost him everything, he was willing to shed his own blood in payment for the likes of this sinful world!

As the Elders gathered that day with Paul, their world was no different than our own. Marred by rioting, marked by tragic death again and again, political manipulations, inequalities, hypocrisies, threats, fear, despair. And yet, Paul encouraged believers then and now to *Keep watch*, not in uncertainty and fear, but in strength and confidence. Not only has God purchased his flock with his own blood, he also promises to care for his investment with *the word of his grace, which has power to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*

Martin Luther beautifully describes the cost and purpose of our Good Shepherd's sacrifice for his flock in the explanation to the 2nd Article of the Apostles' Creed: *He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.*

And so he calls on us, his dearly loved and purchased flock, to keep watch for wolves who would destroy, to be alert for those who would twist his word, to be ready...when we are attacked, and manipulated, and threatened...in the full confidence that we have been bought, kept and empowered to serve him as his lambs. For we are God's people, the flock of his hand. Amen.

ⁱ <https://homesteadinghero.com/how-much-does-a-sheep-cost/>.

ⁱⁱ www.sheep101.info