

The Good Shepherd

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John 10:1-21

The passage for today took place sometime just before the beginning of winter 32/33 A.D. The memory of Jesus' last healing in Jerusalem, the healing of the man born blind, is still very fresh in the minds of the people. It had caused many to take sides for or against Jesus. (John 9:16)

To understand the passage, we have to understand the ancient way of penning up sheep. Within a town, there was often a large walled sheep pen that was entered through a gate. A number of flocks were kept in it for the evening hours. A watchman would guard the gate at night.

If a shepherd were going to stay away from the village in a distant pasture for any length of time, he would build a sheep pen in the fields. It was an enclosure of rock walls upon which he would put thorn bushes to keep predators out. There was only one opening into the sheep pen and the shepherd would use his own body as the door. He would sleep in that opening to be sure that predators did not come into the pen and steal his sheep. As the sheep went in and out of the pen, he could count them and be sure that he had not lost any. Understanding these two methods of protecting sheep, we can now look at the passage.

¹ *"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.* Jesus began His message with something everyone could relate to and agree with. This was a preaching method of some of the Old Testament prophets. (See the example of Amos chapter 1-2) First, they would get the audience's attention with a story they could identify with, and then they delivered the difficult word from God that connected with the story in a way the audience did not expect. Jesus used this a number of times. The audience knew Jesus was describing a pen in a village. Anyone that tried to sneak in the pen without going through the gate had ulterior motives. They were there to steal sheep. (Ezekiel 34:3)

² *The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.* ^{3a} *The watchman opens the gate for him,* The only person allowed through that gate is a shepherd of one of the flocks. The watchman knows the shepherds of the flocks within the enclosure and won't let anyone else in. The shepherd comes each morning to take his flock to pasture. Watchmen sometimes used a watchtower that gave them an overview of the area so that no one could sneak up on them or on the flock. This reminds us of our heavenly Father whose heavenly vantage sees all. He watches over us to keep us safe from the Predator and to open the gate to our Shepherd. (Hebrews 13:20)

^{3b} *and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.* The sheep listen to his voice. You might think this was referring to the watchman, but from observing flocks in Israel, I can tell you for certain this is referring to the shepherd. On the mountain where the Israelites camped before the battle between David and Goliath in Valley of Elah, we witnessed three flocks of sheep and the shepherds of those flocks pass one another. It was a fascinating depiction of the sheep knowing the shepherd's voice. Each shepherd made a distinctive sound. The

Commented [notes1]: 16 Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided. John 9:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. Ezek 34:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 20 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, Heb 13:20 (NIV)

sheep followed that sound. For a short time it looked like one giant flock, but as the shepherds went their own way, each flock followed the sound of their shepherd. They knew their shepherd's voice from the other shepherds. The giant flock separated into three flocks again and not one of those shepherds seemed concerned that they had lost any sheep. They knew that the sheep knew their voice and followed only them. (Psalm 23:2)

In the same way, we are able to discern the voice of our Shepherd when He speaks to our heart. Some people ask me how I know if that voice inside is God or not? I can't explain it. You just do. When you know a voice is evil, there is that inner discernment. When you've been away from a loved one, even for years, and you hear their voice on the phone, you know who it is. You don't have to ask. God's sheep know His voice.

The shepherd goes out in front of the flock leading them to pasture. He knows each one of the sheep. If he gets to the next pasture and one of them is missing, he will know the name of that missing sheep. He lives with them night and day. He knows the sheep and the sheep know him. (John 17:3)

I'm reminded of Scriptures in which the Lord called out the name of His sheep. Moses (Exodus 3:4), Samuel (1Samuel 3:6), Mary Magdalene (John 20:16), Peter (John 21:17), He called them all by name. He knows your name too. He has always been looking out for you.

⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice. The sheep don't recognize the other shepherds' call. It means nothing to them. It is only the voice of their shepherd that they recognize. You can't walk up to a flock of sheep and call them away from their shepherd. Even if the shepherd isn't there, they won't follow you. (1John 2:19) And forget trying to drive them anywhere. It's like herding cats, unless you have a sheep dog that drives them through fear. Sheep can only be led by someone they know and trust.

⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. Up to this point, the people probably all nodded their heads in agreement knowing that they had observed this picture many times. But what is the prophet trying to say? What is His message?

Before we get to the punch line, we have to know a little Old Testament background. What did their sacred writings have to say about sheep and a shepherd? Most of us are familiar with one of those passages, Psalm 23. David wrote, "*The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not be in want. He leads me...*" The LORD in that passage is the covenant God of Israel, YHWH. In writing that, David claimed to know the Lord's voice and be following Him.

But there is another passage you may not be familiar with. Ezekiel 34:31 (NIV) *³¹ You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD.* In this passage, God tells the people through the prophet Ezekiel that they are His flock and He is their shepherd. We aren't so familiar with that

Commented [notes4]: 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, Psalms 23:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 3 Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. John 17:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 4 When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." Ex 3:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 6 Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." 1 Sam 3:6 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). John 20:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. John 21:17 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 19 They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us. 1 John 2:19 (NIV)

passage, but many that were listening to Jesus were aware of it. That makes the next line another of Jesus' powerful claims!

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. Jesus has switched from talking about a village pen to one in the fields. When you are referring to those pens in the fields, the gate and the shepherd are one. Is Jesus claiming to be God, the Sovereign LORD who told Israel that they are His flock? If the picture He just painted is that He is the true shepherd and keeper of the sheep and there are no others, then that is exactly what He is claiming!

Jesus goes on to make sure they understood. ⁸ All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. Jesus is the only way in. All the other Messianic pretenders were not the gate. The corrupt Sanhedrin was not the gate. All those claiming to be the way into the sheep pen are merely robbers. (Isaiah 56:11) Today, that kind of a claim is labeled as intolerance. Jesus called it truth. (John 8:40) Which is it? We get to these powerful statements of Jesus and begin to understand them in that cultural setting and we see that we can't go along with both the world's remaking of Jesus and the real Jesus. They are not the same. They bear no similarities.

Many well meaning Christians refer to other beliefs as good religions. That doesn't coincide with what Jesus is saying here. Nor is it being intellectually honest. If God provided Jesus as the only acceptable way to come to Him, the only provision for our sins, then where does that leave all the religions of works? Will the five pillars of Islam get you anywhere? Do they make you acceptable to God? The teachings of the major religions contradict one another. They don't teach the same God, or heaven, or way to heaven, or way to live. How can you honestly say they are all good? If one is true then the others are misleading. You might say they all contain some truth, which leaves you free to pick and choose what you want to believe. That's not what Jesus taught.

I don't call being led away from truth good. I'm tolerant of others who want to worship any way or any thing they want, but don't ask me to call it good. Don't be intellectually dishonest and call all religions equal when they differ on every major issue. That may be acceptable in that they are nonviolent, and not confronting the difference with Christianity makes people feel good about not being confrontational. However, we should be honest about what Jesus said.

Is Jesus the only way to God? Is He the only way to be safe from predators? Listen to Jesus. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. If you want to be saved, rescued from carnivores, and be a part of the flock of God, then there is only one way, and that is through Jesus. Do you want to be spiritually fed, to be spiritually led to green pastures and still waters? (Psalm 23:2) Then you must go in and out through Jesus, (Numbers 27:16-17) not sacra alignment, or Sanskrit, or good deeds or chanting.

If you are contemplating any other way, then consider what Jesus went on to say. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. Those who came before Jesus, and those who came after

Commented [notes11]: 11 They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain. Isaiah 56:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: 40 As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. John 8:40 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, Psalms 23:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: 16 "May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community 17 to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd." Num 27:16-17 (NIV)

Jesus, who do not go through Jesus are not "good people". They are thieves. The sheep belong to the shepherd. The thief comes for one purpose. He wants a lamb dinner. He wants to steal the sheep to devour it. Those who come in another way were seeking glory for themselves. (John 7:18) They were selfishly devouring and destroying the flock. You can tell a false shepherd by what he ends up doing with his flock. False shepherds fleece the flock for their advantage. (Micah 3:11)

Jesus has come not to exalt Himself, though the Father has exalted Him for His obedience and self-sacrifice. (Philippians 2:8-9) Jesus came for you and me to have life and that's not just living forever. That would be meaningless if it were not for all He brings with that life, "life... to the full".

He promises to fill the void in our hearts. He makes a claim no others can make, "life... to the full". This is such a politically incorrect statement to make. Today we hear about all the other good religions. Jesus doesn't play the "please everyone" game. He speaks truth. He says the thief's entrance results in death, robbery, and destruction. Look at the world today. Hindus and Muslims are killing Christians. It's the truth. You might say what about this religion or that. If they lull you into a false sense of being ready for eternity without Jesus, they are destructive. They may do good deeds and help others in this way or that, but in the end, they are climbing up some other way and refusing to go through the gate. It's stealing the truth and real hope from souls, leading them to destruction. (2Peter 2:3)

One of the most seductive deceptions in our generation came about through a study of life after death. Because so many reported meeting a loving God when they were clinically dead, a movement began to visit hospital death beds and convince the patients they just needed to let go and they would be in God's loving hands. For some reason, that group has decided to ignore or reject the reports of a place of torment often referred to as hell, from those who were revived. I can think of nothing more destructive than convincing a sinner they don't need to repent and receive Christ but should merely let go of this life.

But here is the greatest difference. ¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. You see, false shepherds always end up devouring their own flock. Cults end in suicide pacts. False leaders end up wealthy in a life of ease at their flocks' expense, but the Good Shepherd laid down His life for us. He gave it all so we could have it all, life to the full. False shepherds rarely lead their flock into battle. Suicide bombers are the weakest and most broken among their people. They are never the Imams who teach them to go. The false shepherd is always ready to sacrifice YOU. The Good Shepherd laid down his life for you. Quite a contrast! (2Samuel 24:17)

Jesus compared all the self-seeking false shepherds to hirelings. He explained that since the sheep don't belong to them, they don't really care about the sheep. It's just a job. It's a road to wealth. If the sheep are threatened, the false shepherd runs from the danger. Jesus ran to the danger because we are His.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep. Jesus

Commented [notes15]: 18 He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.
John 7:18 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 11 Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us."
Micah 3:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!
9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,
Phil 2:8-9 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: 3 In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.
2 Peter 2:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: 17 When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the LORD, "I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall upon me and my family."
2 Sam 24:17 (NIV)

repeats the claim from verse 11 that He is the Good Shepherd. This is one of the numerous "I am" statements in John's Gospel. Jesus declared Himself be the Good Shepherd of Ezekiel 34.

He went on to claim that He knew His sheep and that His sheep know Him. You are valuable to Him. He watches to see that you are nourished and cared for because you are His. That is why you are here this morning. He is not one of the hirelings that is in it just for the money. He knows you. (Matthew 25:12) He knows you like He knows the Father (the watchman and shepherd relationship). He has that intimacy with you that He has with the Father. Why? Because He laid down His life for you! There was a lion coming, a beast that was out to devour your soul. (1Peter 5:8) Jesus didn't think of Himself and run, like a hireling would, because He loves you. You are His. He went on the attack to save you. He laid down His life for you. He defeated death and hell for you so that the intimacy you have with Him can continue to grow.

Jesus declared that there were other sheep too, ones not in that pen. We find out later in the book of Acts that He was speaking of us Gentiles, just as the Scriptures predicted. (Isaiah 56:8) He told of the day we would all be one flock. (Ephesians 2:14) We are experiencing that today as Jew and Gentile both find Jesus as their Good Shepherd.

Then Jesus made another amazing declaration. *¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.*" He declared that God had given Him the authority to lay His life down and take it up again. He was speaking of His coming death and resurrection. He would lay down His life for us, but He would also rise from death in victory. This was not only a claim, but a prophecy of what was to come.

They were again divided over the claims of Jesus. Some believed Him, and others were sure He was evil. "How could a human make such claims?" The believers reminded the others that He wasn't just any human; He was One that could open the eyes of man born blind. (Psalm 146:8)

What does it mean to you that Jesus called Himself the gate and declared Himself to be the Good Shepherd? Are you one of His sheep? You may have been distracted by other shepherd calls, but somehow you knew they weren't your shepherd. This morning do you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd? Every other path leads to destruction and death. Jesus laid down His life for you. He isn't out to rob or devour you, He is trying to save you from those who would. All you need do is go through the gate, Jesus, and into His pen.

Do you hear His voice this morning? Then come to Him. Follow Him. Not only will you find life, but you will find life to the full! Many of us have tried being our own shepherd. Let me testify to the fact that that is the road to destruction. I'm so thankful that I have a good Shepherd that has the power and ability to protect me, but most of all the love that laid down His life for me. He can be your shepherd today. Hear His voice and follow Him.

Commented [notes20]: 12 "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'
Matt 25:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: 8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.
1 Peter 5:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: 8 The Sovereign LORD declares-- he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."
Isaiah 56:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,
Eph 2:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: 8 the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous.
Psalms 146:8 (NIV)