

Jesus, the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-21

Warm-up Question: Have you ever had something stolen from you? Share your story and how you felt.

¹ “Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 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.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them (John 10:1-6).

Illegitimate Shepherds

When Jesus found the man He had healed who had been blind from birth, it is very possible that He found him in the Temple precincts (John 9:35), the thirty-five acre area around the Temple, commonly called the Temple Courts. Verse forty of chapter nine tells us that the Pharisees were listening in to Jesus’ conversation with the man and challenged Jesus about His words when He pointed out the Pharisees’ spiritual blindness. Luke tells us that Jesus’ normal habit for the evening was to rest overnight on the Mount of Olives (Luke 21:37), several hundred yards across the Kidron valley from the Temple Mount, easily accessible by the Sheep Gate. It is likely then, that Jesus had this further conversation with the Pharisees as he was departing out by the Sheep Gate, which is on the Northeastern side of the city of Jerusalem. The Sheep Gate was so called because after the sheep were washed this gate was the one whereby they were brought into the temple area for sacrifice. It was common for Jesus to choose familiar sites to elaborate upon His teaching, using “word pictures,” scenes that would be very common to most people’s understanding and in so doing, drive His points home in a visual way.

Jesus may have used the passing of sheep with their shepherd as the occasion to carry on talking to the Phar-

isees about how they were conducting themselves in their sacred task of shepherding the people of God. At the Sheep Gate, it is also likely that there was an enclosure where the Shepherd waited with his sheep until he got paid for the sacrificial lambs that were used by the priests for the daily sacrifices and sin offerings. This would have been a perfect “backdrop” for His message. We know that Jesus was moved with compassion for His people, seeing them as lost sheep. Elsewhere in scripture, in Matthew Chapter 9, verse 36 says; “When He saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” His heart was grieved, as He saw how the religious leaders of the day did not truly care for the people or reflect the true heart of God as the ultimate Good Shepherd.

The Lord uses figurative language (verse 6) to accuse the Pharisees of being thieves, robbers and illegitimate shepherds. He was warning them that they were not caring for the sheep at all, but that they were in it for the matter of financial reward and self-glorification. They wanted to look good on the outside, but inside their hearts they were a picture of dead men’s bones and everything unclean, full of hypocrisy and wickedness (Matthew 23:27-28). They had not become shepherds of the people legitimately by coming to the gatekeeper or doorkeeper, which is possibly a reference to John the Baptist’s ministry, but they had come to the sheepfold some other way. Jesus acknowledged that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees had positions of power. However, He also warned His followers and disciples that even though these leaders were in positions of spiritual authority, they were not to imitate everything that these leaders did. The Lord wanted His followers to give careful regard to what their teachers told them about the Law of Moses and to obey it, but He also wanted them to be aware of the Pharisees’ hypocrisy. Jesus was giving both His followers and the Pharisees an object lesson about what it meant to be a true shepherd of the people and reveal Himself to them as the Good Shepherd.

¹ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ² “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees **sit in Moses’ seat**. ³ So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But **do not do what they do**, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴ They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ “**Everything they do is done for people to see**: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others (Matthew 23:2-7).

There is legitimate authority and illegitimate authority. The Pharisees and teachers of the law had jumped over the fence or sheepfold wall to get into the sheepfold, but their ministry and calling was not of God. The common people were bound to obey them, but it was easy to see that the people had little respect for these religious leaders because of their showmanship, their love for the honor of men, and the respect that they craved that was accorded to them in the marketplaces. The way they had treated the man born blind was further evidence that they did not care for the sheep in the slightest. The Lord had warned His people through prophecy that a time would come when false shepherds would come in and rule the flock by underhanded means:

¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: **Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves!** Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ³ You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but **you do not take care of the flock**. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have **not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally**. ⁵ So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶ My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them. ⁷ “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸ As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, ⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰ This is what the Sovereign LORD says: **I am against the shepherds**

and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. ¹¹ “For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, **so will I look after my sheep** (Ezekiel 34:1-12).

The Legitimate Shepherd of the Sheep

Jesus then went on to talk about His ministry as the Shepherd of Israel, the real owner and Shepherd of the flock of God. He had come through legitimate means; His ministry was witnessed by the voice of God at his baptism when He came to the gatekeeper of the flock, John the Baptist. God had also witnessed to Him by an audible voice from heaven, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

Not only had He the witness of God and the prophet, but also His message had come with a ring of truth, a true sense of authority on His words, “because he taught as one who had **authority**, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matthew 7:29). Even the Temple guards, sent to capture Christ by the ruling leadership of Israel, came back empty handed excusing themselves saying, “No one ever spoke the way this man does,” (John 7:46). When Jesus spoke, people listened. There was a sense of something different about Him. Another time we are told by Luke that the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders were trying to kill Him, “Yet they could not find any way to do it, because **all the people hung on his words**” (Luke 19:48).

What was it about Christ that first attracted you to Him? Can you explain why you were drawn to His message?

Jesus put it this way to the Pharisees: the sheep listen to his voice (verse 3), and again in verse four, “his sheep follow him because they know his voice.” Using parabolic or figure of speech language, He puts before them the picture of the communal sheepfold that was a part of every village in Judea and Samaria. Jesus knew that this would be a “word picture” that people would be very familiar with. In the high ground of Israel there is very little fertile soil for growing wheat, barley or vineyards. Judea and Samaria, of which Jerusalem is a part, was ground that was mostly used for sheepherding, as it was a very rocky landscape. In 1978, I myself lived in Beit Hanina for four months, several miles to the north

of Jerusalem, area which is now (as then) part of Arab land. It was very common to see shepherds as young as thirteen with their sheep having little bells around their necks in case they wandered off. In fact, it was one such young shepherd that threw a stone at a wandering sheep down near the Dead Sea at Qumran and found the greatest archeological discovery of modern time, the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The picture that Jesus gives us in this first part of verses 1-6 is of a communal sheepfold in a village. In verse one, the words, “sheep pen” is the Greek word *aulē*, which means court or courtyard. Many people in the village would have sheep as a source of income. Most would keep their sheep for the shearing of the wool each year. At the end of each day, the sheep were put in the communal sheepfold in the village. The word translated ‘gate’ is the Greek word *thyra*, which means ‘door.’ The walls were high with brambles on the top of the wall. The sheep were kept safe in the communal sheepfold. One trusted individual, the guardian, would watch the gate or door, and only he had the key. Every morning the different shepherds would come, open the door, and call or even sing a special song that each of his sheep would know. They would come out of the sheepfold at the sound of the shepherd’s voice. Only the sheep of the shepherd who called them would follow him out of the communal sheepfold to the grazing land not too far from the village. Because most of the sheep had been with the shepherd for a while, they knew him, and the shepherd knew their names. Often it would be names such as “black ear” or “white chest.” He knew distinguishing features of his sheep, because there was an intimate relationship that the shepherd had with his sheep.

The shepherd always went before them. They followed him implicitly. When he crossed a stream, they trusted him, and followed. Wherever he led them, they could trust that he could see much better than them and had seen green grass ahead. The shepherd knew the terrain ahead; they didn’t have to worry about wherever he led them. They would be kept safe.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. 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. ¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 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 (John 10:7-15).

Verse six finishes with a lack of understanding about His figurative language so in verses seven through fifteen He clarifies His thoughts with them. In the earlier verses He said that He was the one who came to the gate and called out His sheep by name. Now His figurative language changes to the summer months when the grass nearby the villages was all eaten. When it was warmer the shepherd used to wander away from the village for several days leading His sheep to grassy areas further away. It would be too far away from the village to go home for the night, so the shepherd would find either a cave nearby or an enclosure made into a sheepfold would be constructed from the many stones and boulders from the mountainous region of Samaria and Judea. Again, brambles or thorn bushes would stop any wolves from wanting to get over the walls at the sheep during the night. There would be only one gap where the sheep could go in or out the sheepfold. Jesus said, “I am the gate for the sheep, or “I am the door,” depending on the translation you use. That would be the place where the shepherd would rest and sleep for the night. He Himself would be the door of the sheepfold. The sheep would be able to come in and go out, He said (verse 9). Perhaps when Jesus was saying that He was referring to the fact that the sheep that had come through the Sheep Gate of Jerusalem never went out again. Once they were inside of that gate they were ready to be sacrificed. Jesus said that the sheep would go in and out. The sheep could rest peaceful and secure for the night because they could see the shepherd in the doorway and they knew He loved them and would protect them from any wolves.

When we think of Jesus as “The Door,” we often think of Him as a gateway to God. He is also clearly portrayed here as a guard, posted to guard the entryway from “wolves or thieves.” In what ways is Jesus a door of protection in your life? Does this require any coop-

eration on your part?

“I am the door,” is the third great ‘I AM’ statement of Jesus. For those who say that there are many ways to God, Jesus says that He is the door to the sheepfold, the sheepfold being a picture of eternal life and being safe and secure in Him. There is only one way, and Jesus is the only way. We have to come to Him, for there is no other way:

¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we **must** be saved” (Acts 4:12).

We deceive ourselves if we think that there is another way to approach God. If there was another way other than God’s Son taking the punishment for sin, don’t you think the Father would have taken it? Our problem is that we are all easily led astray as sheep seem to stray from the shepherd. The prophet Isaiah put it like this:

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).

There is one who seeks to kill and destroy us, but Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (verse 10). This statement begs the question, if Christ came to give us life, what did we have before He came? True life, the life of God is only imparted to us at the point of repentance of sin and turning toward the Lord Jesus Christ. Before that point we are lost sheep that have gone astray and dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1 and 5). The only way out of our deadness and sin was that someone be our substitute for sin and take the penalty for our rebellion and sin upon Himself. That is what Jesus did. God laid upon Christ the iniquity (sin) of us all. Because it was God in the flesh, only His life could have the value needed to satisfy eternal justice to bring us “home.” Only God could pay the price for us all. It would be His life for our life. I think you would agree with me, that this is a unique exchange, one that is to our advantage far more than we can ever comprehend. Let’s put it another way and use an equation that will illustrate this point. If we were to think in terms of ants for example, how many ants would amount to the same value of a person—a million, maybe ten million, what about the whole population of ants, would that equal one human being? Well,

let’s go further with that thought, how many human beings would be the equivalent value to the creator of all things, the Sovereign Lord Himself? Nothing could equal His value. We are talking about the exchange of the Divine Life for our own mortal imperfect life. That’s why the death of Christ paid for all your sin. No man can take away sin, but the Lord of Glory can, and He did. The Lord laid on His own Son, God in the flesh, the sin of all us sheep that had gone astray. When we believe that He died in place of us, the Bible says that the life of God is imparted to us as the Spirit of God renews us and gives us life. We are regenerated or born-again from above. We have been bought by the payment price of the precious blood of Christ and now we are the sheep belonging to the Good Shepherd who has given His life for the sheep.

Here in verse fourteen we find the fourth “I AM” statement paired with the phrase “good shepherd.” He distinguishes between His shepherding and the false hireling shepherds of Israel that cared nothing for the sheep. William Barclay tells us about the two words in Greek that are translated ‘good:’

Jesus describes Himself as the good shepherd. Now in Greek there are two words for good. There is *agathos* which simply describes the moral quality of a thing; there is *kalos* which means that in the goodness there is a quality of winsomeness which makes it lovely. When Jesus is described as the good shepherd, the word is *kalos*. In him there is more than efficiency and more than fidelity; there is loveliness. Sometimes in a village or town people speak of the good doctor. They are not thinking of the doctor’s efficiency and skill as a physician; they are thinking of the sympathy and the kindness and the graciousness, which he brought with him and which made him the friend of all. In the picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd there is loveliness as well as strength and power.¹

Jesus then states to those listening to Him, that He knows His sheep and His sheep also know Him (verse 14).

Jesus says; “I know my sheep and my sheep know me,” In what practical ways do we discern the voice of the Shepherd and recognize it from all the other voices?

I think it means that He is intimately acquainted with us. He knows us inside out. Theologians have a big

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of John*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, page 62.

word for this ability of God to know everything about us; they say that God is omniscient. He knows all things at all times. There is nothing that He does not know. He never had to learn it; He doesn't have to read up on the day's happenings. We can never tell God anything that God doesn't already know about you. The Lord Jesus, being God, has the same knowledge of all things. He has perfect knowledge, perfect wisdom and perfect understanding of all that goes on. Perfect knowledge is the accurate possession of the facts. Perfect wisdom is the proper application of the facts and perfect understanding is that He fully perceives and interprets the facts. Omniscience makes God infallible; He is incapable of error or omission (Psalm 139:1-10). How wonderful to know that even though He knows everything about us, that He still loves us and cares for us. He truly is the good shepherd—the lovely One!

We do not have that same ability for perfect knowledge, but we can know Him intimately as Savior and Lord. As we grow in our relationship with Christ, the more we find that we can enjoy that nearness and closeness of knowing Him.

One Flock and One Shepherd

¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 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.” ¹⁹ The Jews who heard these words were again divided. ²⁰ Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?” ²¹ But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” (John 10:7-21).

Once again, Jesus is bringing outrage and offense with the truth that He spoke. He offends minds to reveal the hearts of the false shepherds. The words He spoke about Himself caused a polarization again among the people as they considered what Jesus was really saying about who He was. The “other” sheep that Jesus is referring to in verse sixteen are the Gentiles, the sheep that are not of the same “sheep pen,” or flock are those who were of Hebrew origin. The gospel came to the Jewish people first, and then we are told in Acts chapter ten, that it was always God's plan to call the Gentiles into obedience to the gospel too. In fact, the promise came to Abra-

ham that “all families on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:3). The promised seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ, will make Jew and Gentile into one flock of sheep and one Shepherd. Notice that this does not mean that He forsakes the original flock. He says that there will be one flock and one shepherd. He would lay His life down for His sheep that they might receive forgiveness of sins and newness of life. He would lay down His life voluntarily. We give Satan too much credit for the crucifixion. Yes, he was culpable for what he did at the cross, but it was God's plan right from the beginning of the world.

Some time ago I heard via the Internet a story that Doctor Donald Grey Barnhouse once shared. It was about a certain man who had a beautiful estate upon which were some magnificent trees in which this man took great pride. It was his custom to walk among the trees and gaze upon their beauty. This man had an enemy who hated him sorely; this enemy was always seeking ways of annoying the master of the estate. At last the enemy conceived a plan, which he thought would greatly wound the heart of the proprietor. He decided to go to the estate in the dark of the night and cut down one of the most beautiful trees. He laid his plans well. He took with him an axe and saw and he began his work. All night he toiled until his muscles were sore and his hands were blistered. As morning dawned, he saw the proprietor riding with a companion toward the trees where he had been toiling. He redoubled his efforts and with all that he could, he worked as diligently as he was able to do so, and the great tree began to creak and to totter. As it gained momentum in the fall, the enemy began to shout in triumph. One of the branches however came toward him and pinned him to the ground in agony. His hatred however was strong and he jeered at the proprietor who approached him. The owner of the estate called his companion to him and said to the enemy, “You thought to do me a great harm but I want to show you what you have done. This man with me is the architect of a beautiful home that I intend to build here in the midst of these trees. In order to make room for the house it was necessary to cut down one of these trees. Look at this plan. The tree upon which you have toiled all night and which is now the cause of your death is the very tree that must be cut down to make room for my house. You have worked for me without knowing it and your toil is for nothing and bitterness is your food in death.”

Satan thought he was so smart when he tried to get one over on God by crucifying His Son, the Lord Jesus. His effort though, was foreseen and foreordained of God to bring many sons to glory (Hebrews 2:10). We will sparkle like jewels to the Lord one day before our Shepherd:

The LORD their God will save his people on that day as a shepherd saves his flock. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown (Zechariah 9:16).

Ultimately, it is the Lord Himself who saves His people. We do have shepherds on earth, even spiritual leaders to whom God has given charge of His flock. But even so, we are to be mindful of the fact that He Himself is and always will be our shepherd. We should be able to know His voice so well, that a stranger's voice we will not follow. That means that we know His Word, we know His ways, and we know the still small voice that is the Holy Spirit as He leads us. There will be times that you are disappointed by man. Don't let that be an excuse for not continuing to follow the True Shepherd. We are all responsible for our choices and keeping our hearts tuned to the True Shepherd of our souls. John's Gospel teaches us in a very practical sense, how to abide and how to remain in Christ. We see, in his writings a recurring theme about the safety of being in the Lord's care. How fitting it is that John has become known as "the disciple who Jesus loved." He had a deep understand-

ing of the nurturing and caring nature of the Lord.

Psalm 23 is perhaps one of the most well known and frequently quoted passages in all of scripture. It clearly shows us the nature of the Good Shepherd and what we can expect as we follow Him. You may want to take time to read this Psalm. In verse one, it tells us: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." These are the advantages we see of following the Good Shepherd. He gives us:

1. Guidance
2. Provision and sustenance
3. Protection and Safety
4. Joy and peace of mind
5. Confidence and comfort
6. Joy in His presence

Which one of these things do you need most in your life right now and why? Pick one of these things and ask God to make Himself real to you in this way. If you are reading this study in a group situation, share this with one other person and pray for them also.

Prayer: "Thank you Lord that you have promised to be my shepherd. Help me to listen for your voice instead of choosing to go my own way. Help me to recognize your voice quickly when you want me to change direction. You are the One I look to, the One I trust with the safekeeping of my soul. Amen.