

Reading 244
THE GOOD SHEPHERD
John 10

I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11).

The true spiritual leader still cares for the sheep, not for what he can get for their fleece.

Background

Sheep and shepherds. These images are some of the most powerful in the Old Testament. David's Ps 23 picks up the warm and comforting image of the believer as a sheep in the personal care of God. Because "the LORD is my Shepherd" the psalmist is secure. He is convinced, "I shall lack nothing," for God Himself wields the staff of protection, and leads him to green pastures and beside still waters.

The shepherd is also a common image in the Prophets. There it stands for spiritual leaders: first describing rapacious spiritual leaders who profit by exploiting God's sheep (cf. Je 25; Eze 34), and then by promising the appearance of a Descendant of David who will shepherd God's sheep in His name (cf. Isa 44:28; Eze 34:23-24). These images were so well known it is almost impossible to explain how first-century Jews could have missed the implications of Jesus' claim. Their demand to be told "plainly" if Jesus was the Christ brought an understandable response: "I did tell you, but you do not believe."

Today as then, relationship with God is not a matter of hearing the truth, but of believing it.

Overview

Jesus claimed to be the True Shepherd of God's sheep (10:1-6). As the "gate for the sheep" Jesus brings His sheep abundant life (vv. 10:7-10). As "Good Shepherd" He lays down His life for His sheep (vv. 10:11-13), and is recognized by them (vv. 10:14-21). Later Jesus told His enemies plainly that He is the Christ, and one with the Father (vv. 10:22-30). When they prepared to stone Him, Jesus challenged them to deny His miracles (vv. 10:31-42).

Understanding the Text

"The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep" Jn 10:1-6. The contrast here is not between Jesus and the religious leaders, but between Jesus and false messiahs. Christ came to Israel through the gate identified by Old Testament prophets: "The LORD has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners, to proclaim the day of the LORD's favor" (Isa 61:1-2).

Others came preaching a fiery bloodbath of retribution against Israel's oppressors. They were false shepherds, climbing in another way.

History's false messiahs have retained this characteristic. They would bring in God's kingdom of peace by bloodshed, and "liberate" the oppressed by killing the oppressors. Watch out for such people. You'll not hear the voice of Jesus in their strident calls for revolution.

"His sheep follow him because they know his voice" Jn 10:4. This theme is repeated frequently by Jesus. The relationship of an Eastern shepherd with his sheep was personal. The shepherd knew each sheep by name, as an individual. He led, rather than herded, the sheep. The sheep also recognized their protector, and responded to his voice. Their hearing was acute enough that if another tried to mimic his voice, they became frightened.

There's another implication here too. At night typically four or five herds of sheep were gathered together in a protected area or sheepfold. In the morning, when a shepherd called, his sheep responded to his voice and separated themselves from the herd! It was response to the shepherd's voice that identified his sheep from hundreds of other sheep who might have looked just like them to the casual observer.

Today too those who hear the Gospel, and recognize in it the voice of God calling to them, respond. It is our response to Jesus that identifies us as His sheep.

"I am the gate for the sheep" Jn 10:7-10. This is another of Jesus' great "I Am" statements in John's Gospel. Its meaning should have been familiar to Jesus' first hearers, who understood shepherding.

At night sheep were kept in a "fold": an enclosure of stones, briars, or at times a cave. This sheepfold had only one opening, and at night the shepherd slept in it. No wild animal or robber could get at the sheep, because the shepherd was himself at the gate.

As the gate, Jesus presented Himself as the only means of entrance to His flock, and at the same time the avenue through which the flock within would pass to find pasture. No wonder Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (v. 10:10).

"I am the Good Shepherd" Jn 10:1-16. The "good shepherd" is a unique designation, for it emphasizes the willingness of the shepherd to die for his sheep. A "hired man"-and here Jesus refers to Israel's religious leaders-will care for the sheep only so long as it is profitable or safe. The good shepherd who values the sheep for themselves will lay down his life for them. In fact, it is in this, the laying down of his life, that the goodness of the shepherd is established.

If it seems foolish to think of a man being willing to die for mere animals, however great his affection for them, remember this. There is a far greater gap between God and human beings than there is between human beings and sheep! The amazing goodness of God is fully displayed in this awesome wonder: Jesus loved us enough to lay down His life for us.

If you ever feel like a little lost sheep, alone and frightened in a dark and hostile world, remember the Good Shepherd. You can *know* He loves you because He laid down His life for you. He who loved you this much will never desert you. In Jesus you are never, ever, alone.

"They too will listen to My voice" Jn 10:15-16. The Jews had only contempt for the pagan Gentiles, though some actively sought them as converts. But the thought that any Gentile might have access to God without first becoming an adoptive member of the covenant people was foreign to Judaism. Jesus, however, made it clear that the great dividing line between God's own and all others was not to be Jewishness, but rather response to His own voice. Today none of the differences that exist between Christian communities have any real significance. All who respond to Jesus' voice, and have a true faith in Him, are members of Christ's "one flock."

Let's make less of the differences that set us apart from other Christians and more of the Person who unites us as the one people of God.

"I lay down my life-only to take it up again" Jn 10:17-21. There are two things here that thrill believers. First, Jesus laid down His life voluntarily. There was no way that the Sanhedrin or the Romans could have taken His life. His death was a voluntary self-offering. And it was "for the sheep": for our benefit.

Second, Jesus took up His life again! He submitted to death and emerged from it victorious, triumphantly alive! His resurrection proves His authority over all-and assures us that the voice we have heard calling us truly is the voice of God.

Never apologize for believing in Jesus, as though hearing His voice were somehow irrational. It is the person who does not believe the truth shining through the reality of Christ's resurrection whose reasoning is flawed.

"If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" Jn 10:22-30. Jesus *had* been telling everyone. Even though the questioners had not believed, He told them again-and reminded them that their unbelief was rooted in the fact that "you are not My sheep."

Again we see the great dividing line drawn. To those who respond to Jesus and believe in Him, Jesus "give[s] them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand" (v. 10:29). In the great enterprise of salvation, Jesus and the Father are One, as They are in identity, as God.

There is no question about the clarity of this claim. The Jews understood it as a claim to "be God" (v. 10:33), and were ready to stone Jesus for blasphemy.

"You are gods" Jn 10:33-42. Jesus did not deny their charge in any way. He did unmistakably claim to be the Son of God, and as evidence pointed to the miracles He had performed. Jesus also referred to an Old Testament passage that applied the word "gods" to mere mortals or to angels (cf. Ps 82:6). If the reception by human beings of God's words lifted them to an exalted status, surely Christ's miracles proved He was justified in claiming to be the "Son of God."

The argument from miracles was futile, as Jesus knew it would be. The issue is never one of evidence. It is one of hearing God's voice as Jesus speaks to us. While the religious leaders stopped their ears, many others who heard Jesus speak recognized what they heard, "and in that place many believed in Jesus."

Devotional

Tug-of-War with God (Jn 10:22-29)

I remember when my oldest son was about four. We used to play tug-of-war: him against my thumb. Not surprisingly, no matter how he heaved and pulled, and pulled and panted, my thumb always won.

At four, Paul, now in his mid-30s, just couldn't understand that my three-inch thumb was attached to a 230-pound man. Try as he would, his 40-pound body never could win.

The contests I remember are just about as unequal as one Jesus mentioned in Jn 10. "I give them eternal life," He said of those who have faith in Him. "And no one can snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and the Father are One."

Yet Christians, standing secure in the palm of God's hand, often play "snatch." They find some 40-pound sin has a hold on them, and they're terrified that it will snatch them out of God's hand, and that they'll lose eternal life. Or they note some 40-pound doubt skipping around in their head, and they're frightened that it will snatch them away from salvation. Others worry about their own 40-pound will, anxious that it may run wild and catapult them from God's grip.

Well, Jesus has good news, "My Father... is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of My Father's hand."

Jesus has given us eternal life. And God the Father keeps us in the hollow of His almighty hand.

Personal Application

God wants us to build on the foundation of our salvation, not hold on desperately for fear we'll fall off.

Quotable

"Whatever troubles come on you, of mind, body, or estate, from within or from without, from chance or intent, from friends or foes-whatever your trouble be, though you be lonely, O children of a Heavenly Father, be not afraid!"

J.H. Newman