



“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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 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. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 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.”

The Jews who heard these words were again divided. Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?”

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 10:1–21).

One of the most familiar and beloved verses from the Bible comes from Psalm 23: *“the Lord is my shepherd.”* Many have turned to this psalm in times of difficulty. It's been memorized by children who are afraid of the dark, read at the bedside of those who are sick, and recited in more than a few foxholes with bullets flying overhead. What a comforting thing it is to know that the Lord is my shepherd.

In John 10 Jesus claims to be the shepherd of the sheep. As much as we appreciate this image, people like most of us who have always lived in the Bay Area or places like it are at quite a disadvantage. It's not that we're completely unfamiliar with sheep. We've been to a few petting zoos. We've taken a drive through the country and seen herds of sheep grazing in the grass. It's even possible we've met a real sheepherder. But still we're at a disadvantage because there's a vast difference between a Western sheepherder and a Middle Eastern shepherd of Jesus' day. For example, the Palestinian shepherd didn't drive his sheep from behind using a sheepdog to keep them together, he went before them; he led them. While a few sheep would be raised for food or used as sacrifices, most of the sheep were raised for wool. That meant a shepherd might tend his sheep for years. Most shepherds would even name their sheep according to some outstanding characteristic like Long Nose or Black Ear or Gimpy. Shepherding was a personal occupation.

The question I want to ask today is what does the image of a shepherd say about our relationship to Jesus? You might know him as Savior, Master, King and Messiah, but do you know him as your shepherd? What does it mean for us that he's our shepherd and we're his sheep? There are at least five things this image communicates.

Our Relationship to Jesus is Like that of a Sheep to Their Shepherd

Exclusivity

The first thing this image communicates is exclusivity. There's only one good shepherd and that's Jesus. Twice Jesus says, *“I, and I alone, am the Good Shepherd”* (verses 11, 14). It's not that there are no other shepherds, but he alone is the Good Shepherd.

This is where it's important to understand the context in which Jesus said this. This passage follows immediately on the healing of the man born blind. Remember what the Pharisees did with that man after questioning him? They threw him out of the synagogue. They could care less that he had just been healed. Jesus sees these leaders, these Pharisaical rulers of the Jews who had twisted and distorted the teachings of the law, as false shepherds.

This comes out quite forcefully in the first few verses of this chapter. Jesus talks of those who don't enter the sheep pen by the gate but climb in some other way. He calls them thieves and robbers. In contrast to that, the Good Shepherd enters by the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him. Some background is helpful here. At night, the shepherd would place his sheep in a large enclosure where several families kept their sheep. It

was a communal sheep pen. Together they'd hire a gatekeeper to guard the gate and protect the sheep. Those shepherds who were authorized to enter would come back in the morning to get their flock and the gatekeeper would open the gate for them. But those who wanted to steal or wound the sheep would avoid the gate and climb in some other way. These are the false shepherds, thieves and robbers, the religious leaders of Jesus' day and our day, who are more interested in fleecing the sheep than in caring for them.

Often times in the Old Testament God indicted those called to shepherd his people. In Ezekiel 34 God berates the religious leaders, *"Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Shouldn't shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you don't take care of the flock. You've not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You've not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You've ruled them harshly and brutally"* (Ez. 34:2b-4). So these Jews listening to Jesus would have understood that he's using this image to set himself apart from those kinds of shepherds.

In contrast to that, the prophet Isaiah said of God, *"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young"* (Is. 40:10-11). When Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd," he has all of that in mind. There's no one who can shepherd you like him. He may use human pastors and elders in your life from time to time, but we're just under-shepherds. While our leadership should resemble his, he alone is the Good Shepherd.

Vulnerability

The second thing the image communicates is vulnerability. Sheep are constantly in danger. You can't read this passage without that jumping out at you. There are thieves and robbers who want to steal and kill and destroy the sheep (verses 1, 8). There are hired hands who abandon the sheep when a wolf or predator attacks the flock (v. 12).

Today we think of shepherding as some kind of serene occupation where a feminine-looking man in a robe wanders around with a few fluffy little sheep going "Bah, bah..." It wasn't anything like that in Jesus' day! Shepherds of Jesus' day kept their flock mostly in the desert. From Jerusalem, all you do is take a 45-minute walk over the Mount of Olives to be in the desert. That desert stretches for thousands of miles across the Jordan River and through what's today Saudi Arabia and Iraq. From October to March a good rain will suddenly make the desert bloom with a surprising amount of plants, which make excellent pasture for sheep. But during the bulk of the year, the desert is inhospitable to life. Water is scarce, food is rare, and danger abounds. The eastern deserts of Judea have steep, eroded cliffs that drop a thousand feet in many cases.

We mustn't downplay the life-threatening danger of this environment. Even today in the Middle East, to lead a flock through that desolate region with bandits and hungry animals is serious business. Shepherds commonly carry a four or five foot wooden

staff that serves chiefly as a defense weapon. They're also skilled with a sling and stones, like David was. The desert is a desperate and dangerous place.

To make matters worse, sheep are basically stupid and defenseless. Someone has said the very existence of sheep is the best evidence against the theory of evolution because sheep would have never survived the whole survival-of-the-fittest thing. In calling us sheep, Jesus is saying we're defenseless against predators, not very resourceful, inclined to follow one another into danger, and absolutely dependent on someone besides ourselves for safety. When David wrote, *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray,"* he was referring to our tendency to move as an unthinking herd away from the watchful care of the Shepherd.

A good example of this was seen in a documentary that showed a packing house where sheep were being slaughtered for the meat market. Huddled in pens outside were hundreds of nervous animals. They seemed to sense danger. Then a gate was opened that led up a ramp and through a door to the right. To get the sheep to walk up that ramp, the handlers used what is known as a "Judas goat." This is a real live goat that's been trained to lead the sheep into the slaughterhouse. The goat did his job very well. He confidently walked to the bottom of the ramp and looked back. Then he took a few more steps and stopped again. The sheep looked at each other skittishly and then began moving toward the ramp. Eventually, they followed the confident goat to the top, where he went through a little gate to the left, but they were forced to turn to the right and went to their deaths. It was a dramatic illustration of unthinking, herd behavior and the deadly consequences it often brings.

Let's not forget that as sheep you and I live in constant danger and we're completely helpless and vulnerable without a shepherd.

Familiarity

The third thing this image of a shepherd communicates is familiarity. Several times in this passage Jesus mentions how he knows his sheep and they know him and follow his voice. Notice Jesus says in verses 3-4, *"the gatekeeper open the gate for him and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice."* This is quite literally true. You might have wondered if there were several flocks in one pen how the shepherd would figure out which were his. Well, even though sheep are stupid, they know their own shepherd's voice, and when the shepherd calls out to them, they come. It's still true today. During the Palestinian uprising in the late 1980s the Israeli army decided to punish a village near Bethlehem for not paying its taxes. The officer in command rounded up all the village animals and put them in a large barbed-wire pen. Later in the week he was approached by a woman who begged him to release her flock as her sheep were her livelihood. He pointed to the pen containing hundreds of animals and joked about how she'd figure out which ones were hers. She asked if he'd allow her to separate them herself. He agreed. A soldier opened the gate and the woman's son stepped forward and pulled out a small reed flute and began to repeat the same tune over and over

again. Soon, certain sheep heads began popping up across the pen. The young boy continued his music and walked home with his mother, followed by their flock of 25 sheep!

The familiarity and intimacy that exists between us and our Shepherd is seen even more forcefully in verses 14–15a, ***“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father...”*** Jesus knows us with the same intimate knowledge with which the Father knows him and he knows the Father. That’s staggering! There could be no more dramatic expression of intimacy than how the Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father. Jesus knows you in the most profound way. He knows your past with its failures and hurts. He knows your present, your unrealized longings. He knows your idiosyncrasies. He even has a name for you. Have you ever wondered what his name is for you? He might affectionately call you “Grumpy” or “Fearful” or “Distracted.”

Not only does he know us, we know him. We know his voice. I thought a lot about that this week. What does it mean to know his voice when he calls? We know from the rest of the New Testament we have many things that help us discern and recognize his voice. We have the written word of God. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit. We have the fellowship of other believers. We have spiritual disciplines like prayer and solitude. All these help us hear his voice. But in all of this the one thing I must do is listen.

For me, one of the most powerful ways I’ve heard his voice over the years isn’t so much in specific guidance but in words of assurance and comfort. I heard a story of a missionary couple living in Israel during some of the uprisings there. They wrote in their prayer letter: “The result of the fighting and killing has left a profound sense of discouragement that hovers over the country. Several times we’ve come into closer contact with this conflict than our comfort zone allowed. Yesterday a friend shared with us something she observed that was a delightful reminder of God’s care for us. She watched a shepherd caring for his flock near the area where guns are fired. Every time the shots rang out the sheep scattered in fright. The shepherd then touched each of them with his staff and spoke calmly to them, and the sheep settled down immediately because they trusted the shepherd. Then another shot sounded, and the same routine happened again. Each time, the sheep needed the shepherd to orient them again and to reassure them they were safe. We’re like those sheep, and our Shepherd reaches out and touches us with his staff, speaking words of calm and comfort.”

He knows us and we know his voice of comfort. This is what sets Christianity apart. True Christianity isn’t about creeds and rituals and rules. Those things may have their place, but true Christianity is about us having an intimate, personal relationship with Jesus, our Shepherd. He knows you personally; he knows you by name, and you know him; you recognize his voice and you follow. There are many voices out there for us to listen to, but the older I get the more I just want to hear his voice.

Security

The fourth thing this image communicates about our relationship to him is security. This comes out in several ways in this

passage. First of all, in verses 7–10 Jesus seems to change the metaphor a bit. He calls himself the gate for the sheep. He says, ***“whoever enters through that gate will be saved.”*** You say, wait a minute, I thought he was the shepherd, not the gate! But in Jesus’ day, there were two kinds of sheepfolds. There was the communal sheepfold in the villages I mentioned earlier, but during the warm season, the shepherds would take the sheep far away from the villages. They’d be gone for weeks at a time, and at night they’d enclose the sheep in folds that were built against the hillside. Those folds were simply walls enclosing a space with an entrance. There was no gate to that entrance, and once the shepherd had put his sheep in the fold for the night, he himself would lay down across the opening to keep them safe for the night. There’s a sense in which the good shepherd was the gate. For the sheep to enter or depart from the sheepfold, they had to pass over the shepherd’s body. It was that kind of sheepfold that Jesus was talking about when he referred to himself as the gate. There’s no access to the sheepfold except through him.

Not only does he protect them this way, but he nourishes them. He says, ***“They will come in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full.”*** Philip Keller wrote a classic book many years ago called, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm Twenty-Three*. He was a shepherd in east Africa and the land next to his was rented out to a tenant shepherd who didn’t take very good care of his sheep: his land was overgrazed, eaten down to the ground; the sheep were thin, diseased by parasites, and attacked by wild animals. Keller recalled how the neighbor’s sheep would line up at the fence and blankly stare in the direction of his green grass and his healthy sheep, almost as if they yearned to be delivered from their abusive shepherd. They longed to come to the other side of the fence and belong to him.

You see, we have a shepherd that nurtures us and cares for us. This full, abundant life he promises isn’t about an abundance of things but rather an abundance of joy and peace and love and purpose, all the things that really make life worth living!

But he does even more to provide security. The Good Shepherd also lays his life down for the sheep. He says this three times: Verse 11, ***“the good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep.”*** Verse 15, ***“Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay my life down for the sheep.”*** Verse 17, ***“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.”*** Jesus is looking ahead to the cross and resurrection. He wants us to know that he did this of his own accord, ***“No one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord.”*** ***We’re all stubborn, straying sheep. Isaiah wrote, “We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all”*** (Isaiah 53:6). What was the cross about? The cross was about the Good Shepherd watching out for his flock and even of his own volition sacrificing his life so we could be safe and secure forever.

In the second half of this chapter, which probably took place a few months later, Jesus comes back to this theme. Look what

he says in verses 27–29: *“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will 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.”* That’s ultimate security. Jesus died so that we might not have to. He says right here, *“I give eternal life to them and they shall never perish.”* Then he says no one can snatch us out of his hand or his Father’s hand; it doesn’t matter which because, as he says, *“I and the Father are one.”* So if you’re in his hand, you’re in the Father’s hand, and if you’re in the Father’s hand, you’re in his hand. You just can’t get any more secure than that! If you know him as your Shepherd, if you’ve placed your faith in him as your Savior, you’re secure in his hand. Do you know that? The forces of Hell can’t take you from his grip. Your own sin can’t either because he paid for it. And far from this giving us a free pass to sin more, this binds us to him and to his voice even more closely.

Unity

We’ve seen the exclusivity, familiarity and security of this relationship, as well our vulnerability. The final thing this image communicates is unity. In v. 16 he says, *“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd.”* Remember that he’s talking to Jewish people. When he says, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen,” he’s no doubt saying Gentiles will be included in his flock. Today, we take that for granted but it would have been quite a shock for Jesus’ hearers. We know from the book of Acts that it took his followers a while to accept the fact that this was the case.

There’s one flock and one shepherd. We must never think we get to somehow control who gets to be in this flock. As soon as we think we have a handle on who belongs here, the Lord will bring someone along who shatters all our categories and sense of control. His flock includes men and women of all ages, from every race, every background, every political persuasion and every socioeconomic situation.

Every three years InterVarsity sponsors the Urbana Conference, a gathering that challenges university students to get involved in world missions. About 16,000 students from around the world attended the 2009 conference. After the main session each evening, students would leave the larger conference auditorium to meet in smaller groups for prayer. In one of the banquet halls, there was a small group of Chinese students, another group of Taiwanese students, and another group of students from Hong Kong. Large dividers stood between the three. These walls were important because historically these three groups have harbored

bitterness and animosity toward one another. They felt it was best to pray and worship each with their own people. But as the Chinese students were praying one night, they told their leader they wanted to invite the other countries to join them. When the Taiwanese students received the invitation, they prayed and sang a little while, and then they opened up the wall divider. It wasn’t too much longer before the students from Hong Kong pulled back their divider, and some 80 students mingled together. The Taiwanese students asked the students from China and Hong Kong to lead them in worship. The next night, they invited the Korean and Japanese groups to join them, nations which also had experienced fierce animosity. One leader said, “In Christ, we’re all one family...in Christ, we have the desire to make the first steps to connect.” That’s what Jesus was talking about—one flock, one shepherd.

Jesus is the one and only Good Shepherd. We who believe and follow him are his one and only flock. In the Bible there are two different Greek words that are rendered “good” in our English translations. One is *agathos*, which means “morally good.” The other word is *kalos* which means something more like “beautiful.” That’s the word Jesus uses here in John 10. “I am the good. I am the beautiful shepherd.”

Years ago, C.H. Spurgeon wrote, “There is more in Jesus, the good Shepherd, than you can pack away in a shepherd. He is the good, the great, the chief Shepherd; but he is much more. Emblems to set him forth may be multiplied as the drops of the morning, but the whole multitude will fail to reflect all his brightness. Creation is too small a frame in which to hang his likeness. Human thought is too contracted, human speech too feeble, to set him forth to the full. He is inconceivably above our conceptions, unutterably above our utterances.”

That’s the shepherd we know. How does the song go? “Altogether lovely. Altogether worthy. Altogether wonderful to me.” May I add “Altogether beautiful”? Why is he so beautiful? Because he alone is the Good Shepherd. He knows us so well and he’s trained us to hear his voice. He looks out for us so we can live our lives to the full. Because he laid his life down for us and no one can ever snatch us out of his hand. He welcomes every possible variety of people into his flock so that there’s just one shepherd and one flock.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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