

The Good Shepherd

Text: John 10:11-18

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Introduction -

Years ago, Charity used to collect precious moments figurines. If you're not familiar with those, they are cute, adorable porcelain figures that you were very popular. You could get them in any greeting card store, or Christian book store, and there was a mail order club. They make nice decorations, and you might display them in a curio cabinet around the home. Of course, this was before we had kids, because they are fragile and children are not known for being gentle. Many of them had biblical themes and one was the good shepherd. It was a figure of a cute shepherd boy with a little lamb. When you see it, you can't help but say, "aw, isn't that precious?"

For many of us, who didn't grow up in the country, who weren't involved with 4H, that's the sort of image we have in our minds when we read about the good shepherd in the Bible. We picture an idyllic scene along the rolling meadows, with fluffy white sheep huddled around the shepherd. He is gently holding a little lamb in his arms. The occasional "baa" of the sheep expresses their contentment and appreciation for his care. It is all very peaceful and serene.

But in the real world, shepherding is rigorous work. Sheep can be stubborn creatures, and do not always listen the voice of their shepherd. The wilderness is filled with dangers. Ferocious wolves lurk in the shadows, waiting to pounce. And thieves hide along the road. In a very real sense, he is risking his life every day. It takes a great deal of commitment and dedication to be a good shepherd. I'm sure there were some lazy shepherds who didn't take their role seriously. They were the ones taking a nap under the shade tree who left the sheep to fend for themselves, and they run away at the first sign of danger. But those are false shepherds. The good shepherd devotes himself to the flock even if that means enduring hardship or sacrifice.

This is the imagery Jesus uses in John chapter 10 to describe himself and his relationship to us. There are seven "I am" statements in the Gospel of John, and this is one of them. Jesus says "I am the good shepherd." This would have been a familiar scene, for the people of ancient Israel. When they traveled along the road from one town to another, they were used to seeing shepherds leading their flocks along the hillsides and valleys. It was also a common metaphor throughout the OT. In Psalm 23 we are told, "The Lord is my shepherd." And there are a number of other passages that speak of God in this role leading his people, watching over us, and providing for our needs. Ezekiel rebukes the leaders of his day, calling them false shepherds who had neglected the flock instead of tending to those who were entrusted to their care. Several of the prophets used this language to describe the Messiah, who would gather the scattered tribes and shepherd God's people when he came. And so these were familiar ideas to the crowds who listened to Jesus teach.

He was drawing a contrast between his own ministry and the religious leaders of the day. The Pharisees and Sadducees claimed to be those in charge of the nation of Israel. They were given the responsibility of guiding the people in the ways of the Lord and looking after their spiritual

wellbeing, but sadly they were like blind guides and were leading the people astray. Jesus was heartbroken, throughout his earthly ministry, to see so many men and women in the crowds who were lost and confused, like sheep without a shepherd. He came to minister to them as the true shepherd they had been waiting for.

And those crowds in the days of Jesus weren't the only ones in need of a shepherd. We too need him just as much today. Scripture tells us that the entire human race has wandered away from the Lord. We can be stubborn, like sheep, and often make foolish choices, going our own way, instead of following after him. Like sheep, we are helpless and vulnerable on our own, unable to provide for our true needs. The world is full of false shepherds all claiming to have the answer, but not just any spiritual leader will do. We need the good shepherd. We need Jesus.

The Good shepherd cares for the sheep. (v.12-13)

Look at verses 12-13. Jesus said,

“He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.”

There is a big difference between a real shepherd and someone who is only a hired hand. The hired hand doesn't really care about the sheep. He has no personal attachment to them. As far as he is concerned, they are nothing more than dumb animals. This is just a job to him. He's only there for a paycheck. And so at the first sign of danger, he runs away. He places his own safety and wellbeing ahead of theirs. If the wolf is looking for a meal, better them than me! He cares nothing for them. Jesus was probably thinking about the religious leaders of his day, when he made these comments. They really didn't care about the wellbeing of the people. They were more interested in their own positions of power and prestige. They were like hired hands, doing a lousy job of tending to the needs of the flock.

But the true shepherd demonstrates a very different attitude. He actually cares about the sheep, and is willing to risk everything for them, because they are precious to him. He knows each one of them by name, and loves them all. Many shepherds in those days would have grown up around animals. As a child, his chores may have included watering the flock. Every night, when they came into the sheep pen, he inspected each one for injury and bandaged up their wounds. He names to each of them: spotty, patches, brown ears, fluffy tail. Over time, he naturally would have grown attached to them. If anything were to happen to them, it would break his heart. The shepherd loves his sheep.

Some of you have raised animals or have had a pet that you have grown close to over the years. It almost becomes a part of the family. Think of a little boy who decides he is going to show sheep the county fair, for a 4-H project. He spends time every day taking care of that lamb. He washes it, brushes its wool, feeds it. When it comes time to sell the animal, he doesn't want to give it up. He has grown attached.

That's the kind of compassion the good shepherd has for the sheep. Verse 3 says, "...the sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name..." He leads them. The shepherd doesn't march behind them with a whip and drive them along the road. He walks in front showing them the way. Verse 9 says, they "...go in and out and find pasture." He knows their needs and provides. He has their best interests at heart.

It is easy to see how this picture applies to Jesus. We are precious to him. He loves us more than we could understand. As he watches over us, you are not just another anonymous face in the crowd. He recognizes you immediately and knows you by name. He knows everything there is to know about you, having been by your side your entire life. You are not one out of a billion people on this earth. You are one of a kind to him. He watches over us every hour of every day. He knows when we are hurting and his gentle voice offers comfort. He provides for our needs, and wants what is best for us. When we have wandered away, he never stops pursuing us. And he leads us along the path of life.

Maybe you've wondered why Jesus came to this earth? What would bring the eternal God from glory to walk among seemingly insignificant creatures on this earth? The answer is love.

1 John 4:9–10 (NIV84) says,

⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

If he loves us this much, we can trust him to lead us through life. Listen to his voice as he calls out to you. Don't strive against him, but draw close following his steps. The life of a sheep is so much better when it responds to the compassion and care of the shepherd, than when it strives against him. Open your heart to Jesus and respond to his love.

The Good shepherd rescues the sheep. (v.8-10)

Look at verses 8-10.

⁸ "All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. ⁹ I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."

Being a shepherd was not an easy job. He had the difficult task of guarding these weak and defenseless creatures from countless dangers.

Some days it feels like I can barely keep track of three children. What are they up? What kind of trouble are they getting into? It's been a little too quiet. That makes me nervous. But at least children are somewhat capable of caring for themselves. Imagine being responsible for 100 sheep in the open wilderness.

“Where is fluffy? He was here a minute ago. No, don’t eat that plant! It’s not good for you. Wait! Stay away from the cliff. You’re going to fall.” Sheep are not known for being the most intelligent animal, and they are very good at getting themselves into trouble. If that wasn’t bad enough, predators were hiding in the shadows watching for an opportunity to sneak in and carry away an unsuspecting lamb in their sharp teeth. And it wasn’t just wild animals that posed a threat. There was a possibility that a band of robbers was waiting in ambush along the path.

One commentator explains...

No flock ever grazed without a shepherd, and he was never off duty. The sheep were bound to wander; and since there were no protecting walls, the sheep had constantly to be watched. On either side of the narrow plateau, the ground dipped sharply down to the craggy deserts, and the sheep were always liable to stray and get lost. The shepherd’s task was not only constant but also dangerous, for, in addition, he had to guard the flock against wild animals, especially against wolves, and there were always thieves and robbers ready to steal the sheep. ...Constant vigilance, fearless courage and patient love for his flock were the necessary characteristics of the shepherd.ⁱ

A good shepherd was never content to lose even one sheep from among the flock. If one of the lambs wandered off on its own, or was carried away by a wolf, he chased after it until it was found. He wouldn’t rest until it was safely home with the rest of the flock.

Jesus pursues us with the same urgency and passion. Like foolish sheep we have wandered away from the Lord. In our stubbornness we convince ourselves that we don’t need his guidance and care. We think that our way is much more exciting than his way, but before we realize it we have fallen into a ravine and cannot climb out on our own. And there are spiritual wolves that want nothing more than to tear us apart or carry us far away from the God who loves us. We may not even realize the danger that we are in without him. But the shepherd knows, and that’s why he never stops pursuing us no matter how far we’ve strayed. He is constantly reaching out in love, calling our name.

In Luke 15:4-7 (NASB95) Jesus says,

“What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ “And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ ⁷ “I tell you that in the same way, there will be *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

The parable shows us that Jesus is relentless in his pursuit of the lost, and at one time all of us were lost in sin, stumbling through life on our own, unable to find our way back home. That’s why Christ came, to save us. Even though it would cost him everything, it was price he was willing to pay, because he loves us more than we can imagine. And when one sinner repents, when one lost person is found, all of heaven rejoices.

Most of you know we have a little dog named Bentley. Living in town we always have him on a leash when we go for a walk. But when we visit Charity's family in Michigan we let him run wild, because they live in the country. Most of the time he doesn't venture too far from the house, but there was one occasion when he decided to go exploring, and when we looked out he was nowhere to be found. I remember fearing that we had lost him, looking everywhere, yelling his name as loudly as I could. But there was no answer. I ran down the road in both directions, worried that a car might have hit him and we might find his little body laying in the ditch. But thankfully, around the corner I heard the jingle of his collar. We didn't let him run very far on his own after that.

Have you been found by the Shepherd? Or are you still wandering around on your own, ignoring his voice? We see the picture of sheep, walking along a steep cliff, running away from the flock, and we think "how foolish can that creature be? Doesn't he realize what's going to happen if he continues down that path?" But sometimes we are that foolish lamb, running away from our shepherd. Turn back to him. He came to rescue us from the clutches of sin and death. Do not wander any longer, but accept him as your Savior.

The Good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep

Look at verses 17-18.

¹⁷ "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. ¹⁸ "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

We've talked about the dangers that shepherds faced in the wilderness as they tended the flock. Wolves, robbers, predators were a very real threat in their line of work. There were times when he had to make a tough decision. How far am I willing to go on behalf of these sheep? What am I willing to sacrifice? If it comes to it, am I willing to risk my life for them? Or, will I call it quits before the situation becomes that serious?

The good shepherd already knew the answer. When the moment came, there was no hesitation, he was willing to lay down his life for the sheep. The hired hand would never make that call, not in a million years. When he saw a wolf coming, he took off and ran away as quickly as he could. He would sacrifice the sheep to save his own skin. That was the response of the hired hand, who did not care about the sheep. But the true shepherd did just the opposite. He chose to sacrifice himself in order to save the sheep.

That's why Jesus did for us, because he loves us. This wasn't a hypothetical question for him. This was the very reason he came to earth. Christ came to lay down his life for us. He did so willingly, of his own free will. It didn't come as a surprise. It wasn't unexpected. Throughout his ministry, he predicted more than once that, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day." (Luke 9:22 NASB). This was always a part of God's plan to redeem us.

If Jesus had wanted to save himself, he could have taken a different path anywhere along the way. He could have stayed in heaven, and never entered this world. He could have escaped from the soldier's grasp when they came to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He could have summoned legions of angels to rescue him from the cross. But instead, he embraced his mission, knowing full well the suffering he would endure. He gave his life willingly, for us.

We see that type of courage, in different ways, when people risk their lives for the sake of others. In the past week we have read stories in the news about the doctors and nurses working in hospitals across the country who are working so hard to treat patients infected with the COVID-19 virus. They show up every day knowing full well that they run the risk of being infected themselves. We admire them, cannot put into words how much we appreciate what they do. We see it when firefighters rush into a burning building in order to rescue someone who is trapped inside. In some ways this goes against our natural instinct as human beings. Our fallen nature tells us to do what is in our own best interests, to take the path of self-preservation, to forget about everyone else and think about ourselves. But there is a different impulse that moves us to endure hardship and to sacrifice and give of ourselves for the sake of others... It is called love, and it comes from God.

Jesus demonstrated perfect love when he gave his life for us.

When Jesus was brought before Pilate, the Roman governor he stood silent before his accusers. He refused to defend himself when Pilate questioned him asking if the charges were true. John 19:10-11 (NASB95) tells us,

¹⁰ Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?" ¹¹ Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above..."

In other words, it was not up to Pilate whether Jesus lived or died. He thought he had the authority to make that determination, but in reality, the only reason Jesus was standing there was because God ordained it to be so. No one took his life from him. It wasn't the hatred of the religious leaders, or the power of Rome, or the cruelty of the soldiers. It was a choice of the Savior to give his life voluntarily in place of ours, dying so that we might live.

His death wasn't an accident. It wasn't some terrible tragedy that he didn't see coming. His life wasn't cut short or taken from him against his will. It was part of God's predetermined plan. He was willing to sacrifice his own life to save us.

Return the Shepherd –

Jesus uses the picture of the good shepherd to explain the depths of his love for us, but if this were the end of the story it wouldn't really be good news. It would be a wonderful expression of heroism for a shepherd to lay down his life for the sheep, but they what good would it do, for them to be left without a shepherd? Sheep need a shepherd. Without him, they would be lost

and scattered and helpless and alone. But Jesus did more than lay down his life. He would also take it up again.

¹⁸ No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again. For this is what my Father has commanded.” (John 10:18 NLT)

Do you know the good shepherd? Have you heard him calling to you? Have you responded to his call? Or are you still wandering around on your own, resisting his love, like a foolish sheep that insists on following its own path? He loves you more than you can imagine. He has your best interests at heart, so return to him.

Follow the shepherd. Listen to his voice as he guides us through life. He knows where he wants to take us, but we must allow him to take the lead.

Rest in the arms of the good shepherd. Our path through life will be difficult at times. We will go through dark valleys, but we do not need to be afraid, because the shepherd is with us the entire way. Rest in his arms, and find peace in him.

¹ Barclay, W. (2001). [The Gospel of John](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 77–78). Louisville, KY: Edinburgh.