

## **“The Good Shepherd”** John 10:1-18 (NRSV)

**Phillip Keller**, a Canadian writer from Penticton, who also happens to be a great outdoorsman, in his interesting book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, describes a danger that is unique to sheep. Shepherds call it being “cast down” or simply “cast.” It has to do with a sheep that cannot regain its feet. Keller writes,

... even the largest, fattest, strongest and sometimes healthiest sheep can become “cast” and be a casualty. The way it happens is this. A heavy, fat, or long-fleeced sheep will lie down comfortably in some little hollow or depression in the ground. It may roll on its side slightly to stretch or relax. Suddenly the center of gravity in the body shifts so that it turns on its back far enough that the feet no longer touch the ground. It may feel a sense of panic and start to paw frantically. This only makes things worse. It rolls over even further. Now it is quite impossible for it to regain its feet (1977, p. 61).

Keller goes on to discuss some other **problems** that are **unique to sheep**. The overall thrust of this part of his book is **how utterly helpless** sheep are. Although **they certainly seem to be loveable**, among all the animal kingdom sheep seem to have come up with the short end of the stick! From all accounts **they have limited intelligence**. When it comes to finding food **they are definitely uncreative**. As creatures of habit, they will follow paths through desolate places even though not far away there is excellent forage. **Sheep are given to listless wandering**. Also, shepherds confirm **they are timid and stubborn at the same time**. They can be frightened by the most ridiculous things, though at other times nothing can move them. Further, there is no way a sheep can defend itself. **Sheep are highly vulnerable**. Thus, of all animals subject to husbandry, they take the most work.

Truth be told, if we’re honest, I suppose nobody takes pleasure in being compared to a sheep, but **the Bible does make the comparison**.

The Old Testament psalmist describes **the people of God** as “the sheep of his pasture” (Ps. 100:3b). The prophet Ezekiel has an extensive word about God’s “scattered sheep,” the problem of “false shepherds” and God’s warrant that if nobody else will do it, or do it well, he himself will search out and care for his dear flock (34). It is a good image.

Shepherding sheep is the image from which we get Christian church words like “**pastor**” and “**pastoral care.**” A pastor is one who cares for his or her people, and pastoral care is the gift and skill of having compassion and care for God’s people. Somehow, I’ve always been attracted to this image. For my high school yearbook thoughts, I chose two literary quotes: one from **Charles Dickens**, “Have a heart that never hardens and a touch that never hurts,” and another from **Emily Dickenson**, “If I can stop one heart from breaking ...; if I can ease one life the aching, or cool one pain ... I shall not have lived in vain,” – little realizing that they epitomize the life and ministry to which I would ultimately be called.

Sadly, even if we live near a sheep farm, **our twenty-first century idea of this image** is very far from the first-century picture of shepherding and sheep. In that day and age, in contrast to the big and impersonal agri-business of today, **shepherding was a necessary, intimate occupation.** The Palestinian did not drive his sheep from place to place, he went before them; he led them. And while sheep were raised for food and sacrificial purposes, more often than not, they were also raised for their wool. A shepherd would typically tend his sheep for years, calling each one in his flock by name. It was a highly personal occupation. The very existence of the sheep depended upon the shepherd and his twenty-four hour, seven days a week care. That is why there was **no more poignant image of tragedy** for the ancient mind **than “sheep without a shepherd.”**

Interestingly enough, therefore, both Mark and Matthew’s Gospels allude to the fact that **when our Lord, Jesus Christ, “saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”** (Matt. 9:36; Mk. 6:34a).

The Jews of Jesus’ day would have understood Mark’s and Matthew’s point. We also need, today, to see things from our Lord’s point of view because it accurately describes our world. Many people, including many believers, are often “cast down,” and in essence are “without a shepherd.” Of course, many others are contented members of the flock, enjoying tender, attentive care. Perhaps we need to grasp, once again, the imagery and the beauty of John 10, appropriate it for our own lives and enjoy our “sheepishness.” In verse 1-6, John speaks about **the shepherd’s relationship** to his sheep.; in verses 7-10, he speaks about **the shepherd’s provision** for the sheep; and, in verses 11-18, he speaks about **the shepherd’s heart** for his sheep.

## 1. The shepherds' relationship to his sheep (John 10:1-6).

Jewish shepherds kept their sheep in **two kinds of sheepfolds**. If they were out in the country, the sheepfold was a small rudimentary, low-walled corral, perhaps made of sticks or stones, with a narrow opening in the front. If they were in town, the sheepfold was bigger and structurally sounder, and it was usually a communal corral. Often it might have a “professional” gatekeeper.

The latter kind of corral is the image to which our Lord refers when he speaks of the “sheepfold,” its “gate,” and the “gatekeeper.” He pictures the shepherd coming up to the sheepfold early in the morning, automatically recognized by the gatekeeper, readily admitted into the fold, and his walk among the multitude of mixed flocks – consisting of different kinds of sheep and different owners. To the uninitiated, that would look like an insolvable problem for the shepherd, but the shepherd begins to talk to his sheep in a singsong way to which only his own sheep would respond. In this way he’s to separate out his flock and they follow him out to the pastures.

In verse 3, Jesus says that the sheep “hear” or listen to his voice. The idea is one of **familiarity, intimacy and community**. Even though sheep may be stupid, they know their master’s voice. They gather around that voice. Jesus also says in verse 3 that he “calls his own sheep by name.” Palestinian shepherds named their sheep according to their characteristics, as western farmers might name their cows and others might name their pets. One might be called “Long Nose” or “Black Ear,” “Scruffy” or “Fluffy.” This shows us how much our Lord knows us and cares for us. He calls us by our own characteristics. He knows us by name. We hear his voice and follow him.

But this is **just a hint of the familiarity** the sheep have with the shepherd. If we look down a few verse later on, we read, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (10:14-15a). Jesus knows us just as well as he knows the Father as part of the Holy Trinity – with intimate knowledge and great, interpersonal love. This is one of the most staggering suggestions to be found anywhere in all of Scripture. How well does the Father know the Son, who is one with him? Very well, indeed! There could be no more dramatic expression of intimacy than how the God the Father knows God the Son. But incredibly, Jesus says, “I know my sheep just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”

There is no knowledge more intimate than that which our Lord has of us! His knowledge extends into the deepest part of our lives. It is as the psalmist sings,

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
 you discern my thoughts from far away.  
 You search out my path and my lying down,  
 And are acquainted with all my ways. (Ps. 139:1-3)

**Jesus knows us in the most profound ways.** He knows our past with its failures and hurts. He knows our present, our unrealized, deepest longings. He knows our idiosyncrasies. He calls us by our characteristics. He calls us by name. I sometimes wonder if he also lovingly calls us by some of the names we would not want to be called. It's quite possible he affectionately calls us "Grumpy" or "Fearful" or "Restless" just as we might talk to our sheep if we were shepherds.

**It's encouraging to think, not only does he know us, but we know him!** The sheep instinctively know the Lord's voice (10:4b). His is a different voice than the voice of strangers (10:5). And after all is said and done, we probably know our Lord better than we think. After all the years we've lived with him and learned of him, we readily hear his voice, and we respond, and he has met and still meets our deepest needs.

**So, too, pastors are known by their people.** People trust them. People go to them with their deepest needs and, if they are good pastors, they are led by him/her to the Lord Jesus Christ. Someone once wrote this about pastors:

The [pastor] is one to whom his or her people come at those junctures of life when they have come face to face with the unsolvable, those moments when they meet with the limits of creaturely power, when they experience darkness or have intimations of mortality. At such moments, people have a need to draw near to one who, while able like other men and women to swim in the waters of life and stay afloat in them, is not averse to drowning graciously in them, able to be overcome. People need one who has entered deeply into the paschal mystery of Jesus, rejoicing in life, but at ease with death (Fuller Theological Seminary, Theology, News and Notes, Oct. 1998, p. 16).

Jesus adds in verse 4: “When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” If you are **outside** of the fold, the shepherd offers you an eternal relationship of peace and joy, a relationship modelled on that between the Father and the Son, a relationship that will satisfy completely. If you are already **one of his sheep**, that relationship is the foundational reality of your existence.

In verse 6, John interjects with his own observation that while “Jesus used this figure of speech with [his audience] they did not [seem to] understand what he was saying to them” (10:6). So he continues with our Lord’s further explanation.

## 2. **The shepherd’s provision for his sheep** (John 10:7-10).

What does Jesus mean when he refers to himself as **“the gate”** (10:7)? When **G. Campbell Morgan** was travelling across the Atlantic on a steamer he noticed among the passengers was Sir **George Adam Smith**, the most famous Old Testament scholar at the time. Morgan said that among the tales Sir George told of the East was this one:

He was one day travelling with a guide, and came across a shepherd and his sheep. He fell into conversation with him. The man showed him the fold into which the sheep were led at night. It consisted of four walls with a way in. Sir George said to him, “That is where they go at night?” “Yes,” said the shepherd, “and when they are in there, they are perfectly safe.” “But there is no door,” said Sir George. “I am the door,” said the shepherd. He was not a Christian, he was not speaking in the language of the New Testament. He was speaking from the Arab shepherd’s standpoint. Sir George looked at him and said, “What do you mean by the door?” Said the shepherd, “When the light has gone, and all the sheep are inside, I lie in the open space, and no sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body; I am the door.”

That’s our Lord’ meaning. Jesus was saying, **“I am the living door**. In order to get into the fold you must go through me. As the door **I am the protector and the provider**. When you come in through the door, you are not only **“saved”** but you are **safe**. When you go out through me, you go out to **pasture**. I will lead you. **Good things await you**. Nobody comes through that door except the one who comes through me.”

Note in the last part of verse 9, Jesus says the saved will “come in and go out and find pasture,” which leads to his claim in verse 10: **“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”** Jesus Christ provides an abundant or a “full” life for his sheep. **What is the abundant life?** Some who believe in a prosperity gospel suppose it to be any number of material things but, rather than that, it is a deep spiritual sense of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). True, money can buy many things – it can even buy a pasture -- but it can never buy the deep, inner satisfaction that only God in Christ Jesus can bring.

Unlike the thief that “comes only to steal and kill and destroy” (10:10a), Scripture portrays **“the chief shepherd”** (1 Pe. 5:4) leading his sheep into “green pastures” and “beside still waters,” (Ps. 23:20), following up on the occasional stray sheep with a dedicated passion (Lk. 15:3-7), keeping them away from poisonous plants, taking them to good water, making sure they have life and abundance, providing everything for their health.

**What is the qualification to obtain all of this?** Is it to be a brilliant sheep, a beautiful sheep, a well-adjusted sheep, or even an energetic sheep? No, it is just to be a sheep that follows the shepherd wherever he leads, knowing that the shepherd knows what is best for his dear flock.

### 3. **The shepherd’s heart for his sheep** (John 10:11-18).

Then there is this. The Lord makes it clear he is **no “hired hand”** (10:12). There are lots of phony shepherds in the world. There are lots for whom shepherding is merely a job. Not so for Jesus Christ. This good shepherd’s heart is full of sacrificial love. Notice that four times here the Scripture testifies to the fact that **Jesus will lay down his life for his sheep**. He says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11). “I lay down my life for the sheep” (10:15b). “I lay down my life in order to take it up again” (10:17b). “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (10:18a). This is like a refrain from the Lord’s own personal song with each stanza ending, “I will lay down my life for my sheep.” Such is the Good Shepherd’s heart.

Jesus Christ devoted his whole life to humanity every day and finally gave it as an act of supreme sacrifice. He did this of **his own initiative**. The soldiers did not “capture” Jesus in Gethsemane. He could have called any

number of angels if he had wanted to, but right from the beginning of his ministry he decided he wouldn't do that (Matt. 4:5-7; Lk. 4:9-12). Also, how does Scripture describe his death upon the cross? It says, "He bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (Jn. 19:30).

**This is the heart of the great and good shepherd of our souls.** He has laid down his life for the sheep.

#### 4. Conclusion.

Jesus says in verse 11, "**I am the good shepherd**" and repeats it in verse 14. Two different Greek words are rendered "**good**" in our English translations. One is "**agathos**" which means "**good, morally and intrinsically.**" Another is "**kalos**" which has more of the meaning of "**beautiful.**" When Jesus says that he is "the good shepherd," he is both morally and intrinsically, as well as beautifully, "good." There is **something right** about him. There is **something winsome** about him. Years ago, the great Bible expositor, **Charles Spurgeon**, caught the feeling of this and proclaimed,

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 [dew] 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 all our conceptions, unutterably above our utterances.

(Charles H. Spurgeon, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Vol 32, p. 3)

Such is the saving shepherd we proclaim as well!

**He is altogether lovely** because of the way he relates to us, knows us and calls us by name, and because we know him and follow him, he sees to our every need. **He is the gate** into and out of the sheepfold, and when we go in, through him, we find salvation and safety. And when we go out, also through him, through the strength and security of his life laid down for us, we find pasture and abundant life.

And there is more.

Jesus said, “I have **other sheep** that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them in also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (10:16). **Jesus Christ is still yearning to bring more sheep into his sheepfold.** Elsewhere he’d also said, “[A day will come when] people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God” (Lk. 13:29; cf. Matt. 8:11-12)). People you least expect will want to come into his sheepfold. Certainly, this meant that Jesus thought there would be more than the Jewish believers who were listening to him who would come into his sheepfold. At least there would be all those who would later be called “Christians” (Acts 11:26), including many from a Gentile background. And, even beyond, I wonder, if he thought that believers from the other great world faiths would also, one day, stream into his sheepfold as well? Who knows? Certainly our Lord’s heart and vision was large.

The question is, **“Where are you?”**

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep” (10:7). He said a little later on, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (Jn. 14:6-7).

**If you have never received** this relationship, this provision, this heart, submit yourself to him as the Shepherd and Saviour and Lord of your soul today!

**If you’re already one of his sheep** God wants you to enjoy the benefits of this relationship, provision and heart. Follow him, enjoy him, and love him each and every day you have been given.

Amen

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