

Unfolding Jesus: The Great Self-Revelatory Statements in John John 10.1-42: Jesus the Good Shepherd

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David Henderson

I remember one time in the past two years, someone came up to me after the service – this was a person who had recently lost a parent to Covid – and said, in tears, “I don’t understand how God can allow Covid. That just doesn’t seem fair.”

One of the great questions we have to wrestle with as human beings is whether or not God can be trusted.

Most of us can affirm that God is powerful, mighty, sovereign, in control.

Yes, but can he be trusted? Is he *good*?

You . . . didn’t get into the college you wanted. Or didn’t make the team. You were teased by students at school. Or rejected by a group of friends. You’ve watched a loved one get swallowed up by drugs or alcohol. You’ve lost a job. Or a child. Or just learned you have a learning disability, or a hearing condition, or a terminal illness.

Can I trust God now? Is he good?

* * *

We are nearing the end of our walk through the first eleven chapters of John’s gospel in a series called Unfolding Jesus, in which we are studying the great self-revelatory statements that Jesus made about himself.

In each of these chapters Jesus uses a different image to tell us about himself – Jesus is the lamb of God, the new wine, the light of the world, the living water, the true bread, the son of God – different metaphors, different word pictures, each one meant to capture some unique aspect of who he is and why he came, expressed in a way that is designed not just to convey information but to capture our hearts and engage our imaginations.

In the chapter we are looking at today, in chapter ten of John’s gospel, Jesus describes himself using the imagery of a shepherd caring for his sheep.

Living here in the Midwest United States, where essentially the only exposure we have to raising livestock is giant bovine assembly lines like Fair Oaks up the road, our understanding of the relationship between sheep and their shepherd is pretty limited,

but it was intimately familiar to the people who were hearing these words when Jesus first spoke them. This was a word picture that was lived out in front of them every day of their lives.

Here's the basic picture Jesus paints with his words in John 10 to describe his relationship with his followers. This drawing that I found on the internet shows the three main parts of the metaphor.



The Sheep: who are known all through the ancient world as sociable, easily influenced, easily misled, vulnerable, fearful, helpless, and prone to get into trouble.

Basically a wooly ball of needs. That would be us.

The Shepherd: who lives with the sheep, providing for them by bringing them to water and pasture each day, sheltering them by bringing them into the fold each night, and protecting them day and night by guarding them against wild animals or storms or cliffs or shadows or gusts of wind or whatever else might threaten them.

Basically a leader and companion sufficient for every need a sheep faces in life. That would be Jesus.

And then the third part of his imagery is the

Sheepfold or sheep pen: every night the shepherd leads his sheep into a sheepfold, which was a circular stone wall topped with thorns, and places himself at the entrance

to protect them from intruders, and then every morning he leads them out for fresh water and pasture

In John 10 Jesus uses this imagery of the shepherd, the sheep, and the sheepfold to convey really profound truths about his relationship with us.

And the more you know about sheep and the ancient practices of shepherding the more this metaphor pops with meaning.

If you want to learn more, or be reminded of some of the details you may have forgotten, you might want to go back and listen to the sermon I preached on this passage on September 1, 2019, in a series called Snapshots of the Church.

In a sense that sermon is part-one to the sermon this morning.

* * *

What I'd like to focus on today is a second layer of Jesus's teaching.

Jesus says we are the sheep and he is the shepherd.

But Jesus doesn't just leave it at that.

John 10.14

I am the good shepherd.

He says he is the *good* shepherd.

And the more you spend time with this passage, the more you realize Jesus isn't just elaborating on what it means for us to be sheep and for him to be a shepherd.

As becomes obvious when we discover the way that he is constantly comparing the way he treats the sheep with the behavior of others the sheep might encounter – strangers, hired hands, thieves and robbers – his intention in this teaching is to open up the *kind* of shepherd he is.

He isn't just saying, "Whatever a shepherd is, that's what I am."

He is saying, "Whatever sets apart a good shepherd from a bad one, that's what I am."

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd."

Well, right away we run into a bit of a problem here. The problem is with the word "good."

Have you noticed the over-the-top use of superlatives in everyday conversation these days?

Hi, what can I get you?
 A latte, please.
 Perfect. Anything else?
 No thanks.
 Excellent. Can I get a name for that order?
 David.
 Outstanding.

Meanwhile, have you noticed that the word “good” has largely been stripped of its meaning, and has taken on a distinctly bland and ironic tone?

Did you hear we’re supposed to get more sub-zero weather?
 Oh good.

And yet . . . even while the word “good” is getting stripped of its meaning, at the same time – I don’t know if this is true for you or not – when I encounter someone who is genuinely thoughtful, and other-centered and self-sacrificial, someone who, out of the overflow of who they consistently are does something remarkable for someone else, I don’t go to the superlatives. I go to this word “good.” “Wow,” I might say, “what a good man.”

So though this word has lost much of its meaning today, it still has that deep sense – and I think we’ll find that is exactly the way we can use it describe Jesus as our shepherd.

When we turn to the first eighteen verses of chapter ten in John’s gospel, we see Jesus unfolding the kind of shepherd he is through four stark comparisons that he makes.

In the process, he elaborates on four different dimensions of what it means for him to be the *good* shepherd.

I find it interesting that, when you open up a dictionary and look at the definitions of the word “good,” there are four qualities that stand out: (Merriam Webster online dictionary)

Reliable, trustworthy, and true in credentials
 Kind and benevolent in affection
 Virtuous and commendable in motives
 Beneficial or advantageous to others in actions

- and they just happen to be the same four qualities that Jesus points to in himself.

Jesus says

John 10.14

I am the good shepherd.

What makes him a good shepherd? What makes him worth trusting or following?

Let's listen as Jesus describes these four different aspects of his own goodness as a shepherd, and then contrasts those with unreliable others that the sheep may encounter.

1. He is good in the sense of being reliable, trustworthy, and true in his credentials

John 10.2-3

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.

Jesus alone meets the requirements. He alone has a legitimate claim to being God's appointed shepherd.

He doesn't sneak in. He walks in.

And those who are standing at the gate are waiting *for him*; they don't drive him away, they recognize him immediately as the one they've been waiting for and they welcome him. This is an allusion to John the Baptist and the whole line of prophets that came before him, all pointing to Jesus.

Jesus says he is the good shepherd because he is the true shepherd. God himself has testified that this is the shepherd He has raised up.

His miracles, his teaching, the messianic promises in Scripture, and the witness of John the forerunner, the supernatural testimony of God himself – all of these validate him, confirming that he was the one chosen for the job.

This is in contrast to rival shepherds and others we could follow

John 10.1

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.

This world is filled with pretenders, men and women claiming to be God's representatives, God's spokespeople, when they are not.

The pretenders come pretending to care, but they come to take, not to give.

2. He is good in the sense of being kind and benevolent in his affection for his sheep.

John 10.3

The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

John 10.14

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.

He is in a close mutual relationship with his sheep – he loves them, delights in them, is full of affection for them . . . and they are of him.

The language describes an intimate friendship, a close personal knowing, a deep connection and affection. He is fond of them and they are fond of him

This in contrast to rival shepherds.

John 10.5

But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.

There is no close relationship. There is no relationship at all. The sheep don't listen to their voices because the sheep don't recognize their voices. There's don't know or love each other.

3. He is good in the sense of being virtuous and commendable in his motives

His heart motivation toward his sheep is pure. His heart is for their abundance, their flourishing, desiring their best, and he faithfully pursues what the sheep need most.

John 10.9-10

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. . . . I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Sheep coming in and going out and finding pasture is shorthand for a life of freedom, flourishing, provision, and peace, because of the goodness of the good shepherd.

Jesus says that he came to give life to his sheep: life to the full, life that spills over in abundance. The expression means much, more, better, beyond, greater, more abundant.

The point is that when the shepherd comes to serve the sheep, he has come to add to what they have, not to take away from it.

This in contrast to others who may enter the sheepfold for more self-serving reasons.

John 10.10

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

They have come to take from what the sheep have, not to add to it. Their real motive is not to serve the sheep, it is to use the sheep to serve themselves.

4. *He is good in the sense of being beneficial or advantageous in his actions.*

When Jesus is shepherd, every sheep benefits.

That's because he places an extraordinarily high value on his sheep. His sheep matter to him, because they belong to him. They are his.

John 10.3-4

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.

The value he places on his sheep translates into a willingness to sacrifice for them – to put them first even at cost to himself. He puts their wellbeing ahead of his own.

John 10.11

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Jesus will safeguard the lives of his sheep, even at the cost of his own.

With these words he is not only describing his day to day care for his disciples, but he is also anticipating the moment in the not too distant future when he will willingly lay down his life for the sake of his followers to purchase their forgiveness and new life.

This is in contrast to other rivals for the flock

John 10.12-13

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.

You can take care of sheep without really caring for the sheep at all. Shepherds who are merely doing a job care nothing for the sheep. When difficulties come, they think about themselves first. They are motivated by their own interests. They protect their own lives at cost to the sheep.

So in four different ways Jesus spells out why he can say

John 10.14

I am the *good* shepherd.

I have heavenly validation for my claims.

I have deep affection and unwavering love for my sheep.
 My motives are pure, desiring that my followers would flourish in peace and plenty.
 And my heart is self-sacrificial, willing to seek their best even when it will cost me my life.
 I am the *good* shepherd.

Before we go on, have you sorted out who those strangers and hired hands and thieves and robbers are in your own life? Who in your life – maybe it's a well-meaning person with self-serving intentions, maybe it's a bad person with evil intentions – who in your life wants you to believe in them, follow them, support them, serve them, but isn't *truly* good, and doesn't *really* have your best interests in mind?

Friends trying to pull you away from your biblical convictions about sexuality? A culture trying to deconstruct your faith? Social media execs trying to keep you glued to their feed so they can sell you to advertisers? Political pundits and entrenched hardliners who are sowing division in the church? Religious leaders or well-intentioned parents trying to steer you away from Christianity? Colleagues who are trying to dampen your spiritual enthusiasm?

Who in your life wants you to believe in them, follow them, support them, serve them, but isn't *truly* good, and doesn't *really* have your best interests at heart?

Jesus says he, and he alone, is the *good* shepherd.

But that brings us to another problem with the word "good." This one's in **the yes-but department . . .**

How can you say God is good when life is so bad? What if what he thinks is good isn't what I think is good? What if I put my trust in him, and then experience loss and pain and trouble and difficulty in my life?

That's not good, is it?

Think of the words of Psalm 23, which Jesus is certainly intending for us to bring to mind as he speaks about himself as the good shepherd

Psalm 23.1-3

The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need.
 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
 he leads me beside quiet waters,
 he refreshes my soul.
 He guides me along the right paths
 for his name's sake.

So far so good. I can go along with that definition of good. But then comes this. . .

Psalm 23.4

Even though I walk
through the darkest valley or the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

Wait a minute. The valley of the shadow of death? How does that fit with a good shepherd?

The fact that life is hard does not disprove that God is good. At least not in most of the rest of the world.

To people born in parts of the world where hardship is a fact of life, they don't import into their relationship with God an expectation that life will become easy.

But that can be difficult to grasp for those of us born in the US and into a life of relative ease and comfort. Because of our national safety and prosperity, we who rarely have to do without, we who are used to lives largely free from difficulty, we can assume those are the categories in which we can expect to experience God's goodness.

When we feel entitled to a life of ease, we can become like sheep saying to the shepherd:

Rid the land of menacing wolves and killing frosts and sharp rocks and biting flies and loud noises. And bring me a super-size order of green pasture, and an extra-large quiet water while you're at it, would you?

If we're honest, we equate difficulty with failure. We see a person standing on a street corner with a bucket in his hand or someone driving a rundown car and we judge that person as a failure.

We do the same thing with God. If I'm struggling, then God is failing.

But the fact that life is hard, and is filled with pain and loss, doesn't reflect on God. It reflects on *life*. As Moses says in Psalm 90, the span of our days "is but trouble and sorrow." (90.10)

Later in John's gospel, Jesus will say,

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16.33)

Somehow, in the biblical moral economy, difficulties in life and the goodness of God are not mutually exclusive. Dark valleys and good shepherds can exist together.

So what does it mean for Jesus to be good when life can still be so hard?

Well, let's go back to the ways Jesus promises to be good to us.

He never promises ease or freedom from pain. What he does promise us is that he will be worthy of our trust, and a dear and ever-present friend, that his heart's desire will always be for our best, and that he will put our own needs ahead of his own, even when it costs him his very life.

Jesus isn't a magic genie who makes life easy. He is the good shepherd who is by our side even when life gets really, really hard.

His project isn't to give us a life of ease. It is to fold those who are his into his embrace.

He uses the privations and the pests and the predators in our lives like sheepdogs to drive us back toward him, the good shepherd.

All the threats and losses and struggles and uncertainties of life are the staff in the shepherd's hand that he uses to help us discover how good he is, and that we can go through life with him, held by him, carried in his arms.

* * *

Up to this point in the passage Jesus has been answering the question we've been asking.

What kind of shepherd is he? A good shepherd, he assures us.

Now the conversation shifts, and he's the one asking us the question. And the question?

What kind of sheep are we?

John 10.27-28

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.

What a great simple description of the life to which Jesus calls us:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

My sheep listen to my voice. We look to Jesus to be our shepherd, to lead us and provide for us. Amid all the clamoring voices competing for our hearts we have given *him* our attention and our allegiance.

I know them. The heart of the Christian life is not a life of keeping rules or conforming to standards but a *relationship* with the living God, an ever-deepening knowing and being known, loving and being loved, made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. .

And they follow me. Did you ever notice how sheep get from one place to another? They don't walk from one place to another. They walk from wherever they are to wherever the shepherd is, and the shepherd, in their midst, at their head, walks from one place to another. As they keep drawing near to him, he keeps drawing them into the life he has for them.

That's what it means to follow Jesus, the good shepherd.
 Keep listening for him. Hearing him.
 Keep looking for him. Finding him.
 Keep moving toward him. Abiding in him. Resting in him.

Katherine Brown print: Jesus and the Lamb



This print by Katherine Brown called "Jesus and the Lamb" captures the essence of the life to which Jesus the good shepherd calls us. Finding our home in his loving heart.

What kind of shepherd is he? A *good* shepherd. No matter what life holds.

What kind of sheep will we be?

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

Whether we find ourselves in pain. In confusion. In gratitude. In loss. In peace. In disappointment. In plenty. In loneliness. In fear. In joy. He invites us to find ourselves in his loving embrace. No matter what life holds, to let him hold us.

As the worship band comes forward to close our service, let's just keep that image up for a moment. With your eyes open, looking at the image, what do you hear the good shepherd saying to you this morning?

Live a life of love.

Love Jesus.

Love his people.

And pour out his love on this world.

Notes

Katherine Brown drew this sketch in response to reading the words of Isaiah 40.11:

He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;

John 10.27-28

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.

All of which leads us to the other main question this passages asks, which I want to touch on briefly as we close.

The first question:

What kind of shepherd is he?

The answer? A *good* shepherd.

The other question this passage asks is:

What kind of sheep are we?

The answer?

In the second half of this chapter, the subject continues, but the scene shifts, and so does the perspective. Jesus is still talking about sheep and shepherds, but now he shifts and begins speaking primarily about the sheep.

As it says in verse 19, the crowd is divided over his words

Some hear his words and think he is crazy, or demon possessed, and that he deserves to die because he claims to be equal to God.

Other people, hearing the exact same words, and seeing the exact same miracles, believe that Jesus came from God, and that his life puts the power and presence of God on display.

Jesus has spoken of different kinds of shepherds. Now he begins to speak of different kind of sheep.

Beginning in verse 25, Jesus speaks of two different kinds of sheep – those who listen to his voice and believe in him . . . and those who don't.

What kind of sheep are we?

I give them eternal life. They will never perish. And no one will snatch them from my hand. The life we share with Jesus in this life is only the beginning. As Pascal put it, “One day’s training on earth in exchange for eternity in God’s presence.”

The first question:

What kind of shepherd is he?

The answer? A *good* shepherd.

The other question this passage asks is:

What kind of sheep are we?

Your answer?

Life *is* hard. But God is good.

But we can feel we’ve been dealt with unjustly when difficult things happen to us. We can feel entitled to an easy and pain-free life and we can hold it against God when that isn’t the way life is.

God’s project
Bring us near
Make us fit for heaven

But Jesus doesn’t invite us into a life of ease.
He invites us into a life in his embrace.
doesn’t promise to bring us into ease. He promises to

We don’t learn he is good by having a life free of pain and struggle. We learn that he is good by turning to him in our pain and struggle.

This is a room full of men and women and young people who can say, “And yet, God has been good to me.” The people seated on either side of you who have followed

Jesus for any length of time at all can point to one experience after another of the goodness of God.

Good not equal to making life easy,
Good equal to loving, caring, seeking best at cost to self

Shift briefly to the other half of the passage, where Jesus speaks about the different kinds of responses he finds from the crowds

What kind of sheep are we?

John 10.14,16

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. . . . 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.

Whose flock are you part of?
Who is the shepherd whose goodness you rely on?

Which takes us over the other side of the chapter, and the reciprocal dimension of this image

If I am the good shepherd, then you . . .

Don't just follow after him. Draw near to him. Listen for his voice.

two different kinds of sheep
Those who are part of his flock, those who are not

If they're not part of his flock, they are part of the flock of either a hired hand, who is generally good but is not committed to the flock's wellbeing, or to a thief or robber, who is generally bad, and is out to steal, kill, and destroy

Hired hands
Friends, work, family members
Boss, teacher, coach
Political parties promising the best candidates
All of which call to us, promise to meet our needs
None of which can ultimately satisfy the deepest need we have, none which are capable of giving us the abundant, spilling over to overflowing life that God offers us

Thieves and robbers

X; Social media, with its algorithms and selective programming that hooks our insecurities and feeds our addictions and breeds our lusts and plays on our envy and our greed

X: all the sports betting apps that are being pushed so heavily during football games

Not a third category of those who recognize his voice and hear their name called but don't follow him – those fit in the not his sheep category

One flock, one shepherd

This week

Ask someone to tell you their story of Jesus' goodness.

Read in the gospels every day so you can learn to recognize his voice.

Think back on the faithfulness of God in your life to use the hard things to drive us into his arms.

We run to his arms in joy. We are driven into his arms by pain.

Abundant life

perissos: lit. all-around, "more than", abundantly; beyond what is anticipated, exceeding expectation, going past the expected limit – spilling over
much, more, better, beyond

of the one to whom much is given *more* is expected

Who or what offers you the good life?

Other people

social media

peer groups

family, children, parents

Other activity

work

sports

exercise

Other stuff

accomplishment

accumulation

False shepherds

Social media – bring friends close, give you a community, make your life rich

Marketing – give you what you want to have a full and meaningful life
 Alcohol and drugs – make it all go away
 binge watching TV or binge playing video games or binge exercise or binge eating
 employers who dictate our working hours, require everpresent availability
 causes/battles: political, cultural, societal, something to get wrapped up in, consumed by, but not capable of delivering

there is much that offers us more
 at best, they neglect our real need
 at worst, they rob life from us

core distinction
 motivated by what is best for them versus motivated by what is best for the sheep

Katherine Brown was inspired by Isaiah 40.11 when she drew this image

Overview Questions

What kind of shepherd is he? John 10.1-18

What kind of sheep are we? John 10.22-30

Jesus anticipates what this will mean for him: laying down his life

I am the *good* shepherd.

Who is validated as the one right choice?

Who is rightly motivated?

Who has your best interests at heart?

Merriam Webster:

reliable, of favorable character,
 virtuous, commendable,
 kind, benevolent,
 beneficial, advantageous,

He knows our names, we know his voice.

Relationship, intimacy, presence, provision through life's challenges, not protection from life's challenges

Something the church in other parts of the world understands but we wrestle to accept

– covid or death of a family member or loss of savings or loss of a job

All of us will struggle, all of us will experience pain and loss, all of us will eventually die. That's not God's failure. That's life's course in a fallen world.

We are not gods. We are finite, mortal beings with finite physical bodies and limited life spans.

On Friday I had a melanoma removed from my back. It was small and hadn't begun to spread and the surgeon was confident he got it all. But as I was lying there in the operating room chatting with the surgeon while he did his work, I noticed a song came on over the speakers in the background. It was a song by the group Kansas. Based on verses from the book of Ecclesiastes that talk about how we came from dust and will return to dust (1.14 and 3.20), the refrain in the song says: "All we are is dust in the wind."

You may remember that in John 6 Jesus describes himself as the bread of heaven (6.33, 35, 51). But as you study the passage, you realize there is another layer to his message. He isn't just describing himself as bread from God, he is explaining why we can be confident that he is the *true* bread from God (6.32) – the one-and-only authentic bread, the bread that comes with God's supernatural credentials, amid a bunch of false or counterfeit versions.

In a similar way here, in chapter 10, Clearly Jesus is pointing back to one of the most familiar parts of the whole bible, the 23rd psalm. The Lord is my shepherd.

On the shallow end of the common sense spectrum
In a previous sermon I described them as a wooly ball of needs

Don't drive them along from behind but walk with them and in front of them

What kind of shepherd is he?

10.8

All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.

10.9

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture.

Better: be brought in and out and be led to pasture.

10.10

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

10.11

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

10.12

The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. . . . He is a hired hand and he cares nothing for the sheep.

10.14

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.

Here are the three most important characteristics of sheep.

Sheep are incredibly

Social

They enjoy each other's company and love to flock together and frolic together

They know each other and like to be with familiar sheep

They are greatly influenced by one another

They are very aware of and influenced by other sheep and are quick to follow each other; what the sheep around them are doing almost always determines what they will do

They don't just like each other's company, they need other sheep to feel safe

they like to be able to see each other all the time, and being separated from each other can cause them to stress and panic and become completely helpless

That leads to the second characteristic of sheep

Sheep are incredibly

Fearful

constantly monitoring for danger,

Sheep are easily frightened and overwhelmed

They become anxious and skittish when they see shadows and sharp contrasts they are hesitant to be led into enclosed spaces

When they see quick movements or hear loud noises like the bark of a dog they are startled and panic and jump to their feet

An Animal Welfare study on sheep says: "As with humans, despair is triggered by situations they see as sudden, unfamiliar, unpredictable, and uncontrollable"

That leads to the third thing

Sheep are incredibly
Vulnerable

Because they lack even the most basic ability to reason or solve problems, and because they have absolutely no sense of their surroundings, they constantly get in trouble and they are incapable of getting themselves back out of it

They are vulnerable to fear

When they become frightened they become helpless and they panic
 they bunch together and run around in circles

They are prone to get themselves in trouble

They love to climb and they are incredibly curious, and they follow their curiosity wherever it leads them without discrimination

And they are always hungry, and they follow their hunger wherever it leads them
 And in both cases, it is usually right into trouble

And they are not only prone to get themselves in trouble

They are vulnerable to being led into trouble by each other

One of their deepest instincts is to do whatever the sheep in front of them is doing,

And they are vulnerable to attack

Unlike other animals, they have no ability to defend themselves

In spite of all the head butting and foot stomping and shoving and nudging they do with each other, when they are caught by an enemy they go limp

Basically a sheep could never exist on its own

It has no ability to find food or shelter

It is unable to defend themselves against a predator

And it is incapable of finding its way home if it gets lost

It is basically one big wooly ball of needs

landscape in the region where David and Jesus lived. .

It's characterized by limited food supplies, limited water sources, dust storms, insect swarms, blistering temperatures, limited shade, all of it crisscrossed with unknown paths, and scored with deep, narrow ravines that threaten flash floods, rock slides, and steep drop-offs. As if that wasn't enough, the land was prowled by wolves, bears, lions, panthers, and hyenas, and venomous snakes were everywhere.

Not only that, but in a region that was without police coverage or any kind of a societal infrastructure, thieves were common, whether hiding in crevices as flocks passed by and grabbing the stragglers, or climbing into sheep pens in the pitch black of night, slitting the throats of the sheep, and passing their bodies over the wall to an accomplice.

Can you imagine a panicky, fearful, clueless and defenseless sheep out here? Without a caring and capable shepherd it wouldn't last a day.

The Corresponding Image of God

It is with that sort of understanding of the needs of sheep, and against this sort of understanding of the hostile land where they grazed, that we are meant to hear the words David wrote in Psalm 23 when he wrote

The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing (Psalm 23.1 NIV)
I have everything I need. (Psalm 23.1 GNT)

. . . and the words of John 10 that we are looking at today, when Jesus says:

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10.14-15)

From the New Testament perspective, we are those needy sheep. And Jesus is that trustworthy shepherd that we so desperately need to survive and thrive.

That was the most common way that Jesus was portrayed during the first four hundred years of the church, in paintings, carvings and sculptures: as the Good Shepherd, carrying the lost lamb back to the fold on his shoulders. We'll see why as we go.

What the Corresponding Image Tells Us about Jesus

Let's turn to that passage in John 10 now and walk our way through it, and see what we can discover about this shepherd and his trustworthy love for his sheep.

John 10.1-2

“I tell you the truth, 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.

Photo: 19280004 Sheep fold (central Turkey near Pisidian Antioch)



To understand this passage I need to take a minute to introduce you to this structure. This is something you see all across the grazing land of the Middle East. This one happens to be one I saw in central Turkey.

This is called a “sheepfold.”

A sheepfold is a circular or rectangular enclosure made from field stone, with walls about waist- or chest-high and topped with sharp thorns. The sheepfold is where sheep are led every night to sleep when they are out in the grazing areas.

Sheepfolds don’t have roofs because sheep are frightened by enclosed spaces. They actually feel safer sleeping out under the stars as long as they are surrounded by walls.

The sheepfold has a single opening which is known as the gate. It is in through that gate that the sheep are led each night. The shepherd lays his staff across the entrance and counts the sheep as they pass under it to make sure he has his whole flock. Then once they are all inside and settled in, because the gate is the only vulnerable part of the enclosure, he builds a fire by the entrance and then lies down in front of the gate to sleep. Then in the morning he leads them out through the gate to pasture.

John 10.3-4

”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.

The shepherd knows them . . . and they know him

As the shepherd leads the way to the grazing area, he calls out to them, “Ha ha, come, come.” He keeps calling as he walks along the path in from of them or alongside them, and the sheep recognize his voice and run after him.

Shepherds always have names for their favorites, and they usually reflect a knowing of the sheep by the shepherd, something like Grey Ears, Short Tail, Big Red, Black Spot, Pure White, Stripes, or Angel.

It doesn’t matter if it is dark, or thick fog, or if the sheep are grazing in the middle of a larger group of sheep made up of several flocks – when the shepherd calls their names, the sheep hear his voice and come running in response.

Calling sheep in the fog: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Coq_grSFINs

The shepherd leads them and goes with them

Being a good shepherd requires careful consideration and planning, leading the sheep out in the morning to a patch of grass that hasn’t yet been grazed and that isn’t too far away, especially during the time when the sheep have their young, and then to a place where there is calm water and shade for rest in the middle of the day when it is hottest, and then back to the fold and tucked in again before it gets dark

John 10.5-6

“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.

There are some fun YouTube videos that show strangers trying to call sheep and being completely ignored. Then the shepherd calls his own sheep and the sheep stop grazing, lift their heads, and come running.

John 10.7-8

“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.

Part of what Jesus is doing is presenting himself as the shepherd of the people of God in the tradition of Psalm 23 and Psalm 100.

But part of what he is also doing is exposing the inadequate spiritual leadership of the Jewish people, in the prophetic tradition of Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 34. Ezekiel 34, the passage of Scripture that would have been read in the synagogue during the very week that this conversation was taking place [see John 10.22], lamb-bastes the religious

leaders for being unfaithful and self-serving shepherds, and announces that God himself will come and shepherd the people.

So Jesus is also claiming to be the fulfillment of that prophesy – He is God himself coming in human flesh to shepherd his people.

John 10.9-10

"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.

The good shepherd makes sure his sheep are safe and sound. He **provides** for his sheep, leading them to food and water and shelter.

He also **protects** them, using his rod – which was essentially a club – to protect them, and his staff, which would have had a crook at the end, to guide them into the right path from among all the many wrong ones, and to rescue them when they get off the path.

Every one of their basic needs, none of which they are capable of providing for themselves, he is faithful to provide, and in abundance. The next part of the passage exposes why. He loves the sheep and is committed to their wellbeing no matter what.

John 10.11-13

"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.

The open land is so hostile and it has so many hardships and challenges that a hired hand will eventually come to a place where he has had enough. In the end, he's just thinking about himself. He abandons the sheep and leaves. Not the shepherd. He knows them, he loves them, they matter to him, so he is willing to sacrifice his wellbeing for theirs. Even to the point of dying for them.

This is where the shepherding imagery begins to fade to the background and Jesus speaks directly about who he is and why he has come.

John 10.14-16

"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.

John 10.17-18

“My Father loves me because 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.”

Jesus declares that has come from on high to fulfill God’s redemptive purposes for lost and needy humanity. Faithfully carrying out the Father’s call, Jesus offers up his life on the cross in our place to set us free from our anxious and fearful independence from God and to bring us into the same sort of intimate relationship with God that he enjoys.

His is a personal and narrow mission, focused on each one of us, each lost and missing sheep. If we choose him as our shepherd, he promises to go before us and come behind us each day. To protect us, provide for us, love us, lead us.

And not only each of us, but all of us. His is a global mission as well, directed not just to each of us, but to all of us. He lays down his life for the sake of sheep in every tribe and tongue and nation and language around this world and throughout the ages who recognize his voice and respond to his call.

I am the *good* shepherd.

George Herbert, in his poetic translation of Psalm 23, asks:

The God of love my shepherd is,
And he that doth me feed:
While he is mine, and I am his,
What can I want or need?

John 10

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.

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. 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?”

²² Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon’s Colonnade. ²⁴ The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

²⁵ Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.”

³¹ Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, ³² but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?”

³³ “We are not stoning you for any good work,” they replied, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are “gods”’? ³⁵ If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be set aside— ³⁶ what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’? ³⁷ Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. ³⁸ But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the

Father is in me, and I in the Father.”³⁹ Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.

⁴⁰ Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. There he stayed,⁴¹ and many people came to him. They said, “Though John never performed a sign, all that John said about this man was true.”

⁴² And in that place many believed in Jesus.