

I Am the Shepherd

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Introduction.

- A. As we consider the teaching of Jesus, one of the most striking things about it is the way that He uses familiar things to instruct His audience in spiritual concepts. All of His agricultural metaphors about seeds and wheat and chaff and harvesting would have been as common as dirt to His first-century audience. It would be like if Jesus came to modern-day Joliet and made parables about traffic jams and cornfields. We would get that.
- B. What we don't get as easily, though, are some of the first-century metaphors that Jesus did use. Some still make perfect sense to us. None of us, for instance, wrestle with the comparison when Jesus says, "I am the light." On the other hand, though, when Jesus describes Himself as a shepherd and talks about sheep, we don't get that—at least, many of us don't. In my life, I've never known a shepherd, much less been one.
- C. However, friends, despite the greater difficulty we have in understanding what Jesus is saying with this, it's important for us to grasp it. This pastoral metaphor tells us a lot, both about Jesus and about ourselves. Let's turn to John 10, then to figure out what it means when Jesus says, "I am the Shepherd."

I. John 10:1-13.

- A. In this extended metaphor, Jesus first describes Himself as the one who is **ENTERING BY THE DOOR**. This is the point that He makes in John 10:1-6. Now, all of this is very opaque to us, but when we look at the customs of the first-century shepherds, it becomes much clearer. The first thing we need to grasp is that shepherding was usually a lonely business. Because Palestine was such arid, infertile country, you couldn't just keep your sheep in your backyard and trust that it would be enough to feed them. Instead, the shepherd had to lead his flock all over the place in search of pasture, and he was often gone for weeks at a time. You ever talk to things when you're by yourself and there wasn't anybody around to hear you? Well, guess what the shepherd did on his lonely journeys: he talked to his sheep. Over time, the sheep got used to the sound of the shepherd's voice, and he could begin to command them with his voice alone.
- B. That was the way it usually was. Sometimes, though, in a particularly fertile area, a number of shepherds and their flocks would come together. That was party time for the shepherds. They would put all of their flocks together in one big sheepfold, leave one poor unlucky shepherd behind to stand guard, and go off and hang out. When it came time to leave, each shepherd would come back, be admitted by the door guard, and call for his sheep. Now, I don't know if shepherds can tell one sheep from another, but sheep can tell one shepherd from another. The sheep who belonged to that shepherd would hear his voice, trust him, and follow him.
- C. Now, if you are a sheep rustler, it isn't so easy. In the first place, the shepherd on guard duty at the door isn't going to let you in, so you have to climb over the wall. Second, the sheep don't know your voice, so they won't follow you. If you want to get yourself a sheep, you basically have to drag it with you.
- D. All of this is new to us, but to someone in first-century Palestine, Jesus saying all of this would have been like explaining what snow was to someone who lives in Chicago. They understood the metaphor; they just didn't get the point, that just like the shepherd is to the sheep, so Jesus is to mankind. In the first place, Jesus has come to us by the door. He came in the way that the prophecies of the Old Testament said He would come. Indeed, He fulfilled every prophecy that had been given. Like the genuine shepherd, Jesus is for real.
- E. Also, though, just like the sheep knew the voice of the shepherd, so too would the people know the voice of Jesus. Over and over again in the gospels, we see someone remarking on the powerful speaking of Jesus. The people recognized that He taught with authority. The guards of the temple said they had never heard a man speak like Him. Even the chief priests recognized that if Jesus was left to Himself, soon the whole nation would be following Him. The sheep just heard the voice of their Shepherd, just like we hear it today.
- F. For the Jews who still weren't getting the point, though, Jesus next describes Himself as **THE DOOR OF THE SHEEP**. This is the object of His commentary in John 10:7-10. Once again, this is a point that misses us. What in the world does Jesus mean when He describes Himself as a door? After all, sheep have wool, hooves, and tails, but they don't have doors. Here's what we need to understand, though: When the shepherd was off on his own, he would often put his sheep in a sheepfold for the night, a pen made out of anything from stone to thornbushes. These folds were often in the form of a spiral, and you had the sheep in the middle. All around the fold were the dangers of the night: wolves, robbers, and thieves, just to name a few. If the sheep got out of the fold, they were easy prey. Likewise, if a wolf succeeded in getting through the entrance, the sheep were dead meat. So here's what the shepherd did: he spent the whole night sleeping in the neck of the spiral. Anything that wanted the sheep had to go through him first. He was the door of the sheep.
- G. When we bring this understanding back to the text, then, it's easy to see what Jesus is getting at. When He tells us that He is the door of the sheep, He's telling us that He stands between us and danger. First of all, when Jesus adds us to His church, it's like a shepherd allowing a sheep into his fold. Now, instead of being

easy prey for the devil, who is described as a roaring lion, we are protected from harm. Once we are in the fold, Jesus won't let us do the things that aren't safe for us. He wants us to find pasture and life, not death, so He guides us to do beneficial things through His word. He doesn't restrict our behavior because He's mean and hates us; instead, the commandments of the Bible are a sign of His love and care for us. He's the door.

- H. In addition to being the door, though, He also tells us that He is **THE GOOD SHEPHERD**. We see Him revealing this in John 10:11-13. In this passage, Jesus highlights the dangers that attend the life of the shepherd. I've heard it said that being a soldier in a war means living through days and days of boredom, punctuated by moments of extreme terror, and I suspect that being a shepherd was the same way. 99% of the time nothing was happening, but the other 1%, there was something big and nasty and mean that wanted to eat your sheep. Jesus here mentions wolves; we know from the life of David that it was also common for lions and bears to attack sheep in Palestine. To deal with these large, ferocious predators, the shepherd had not a sword, not a spear, but his trusty shepherd's staff. He was supposed to fight off hundreds of pounds of claw and fang and muscle with a glorified stick. Those are not good odds, friends! It's hardly surprising, then, when the hirelings of Jesus' day decided that they weren't being paid enough for this and fled, leaving the sheep to be eaten. The shepherd, though, the one who owned the sheep, the one who spent years with the sheep, the one who talked to the sheep, the one who loved the sheep—he would stay. He would risk his life to fight off the lion or the bear with his stick, and if necessary, he would die for his sheep. Now we might think, "Surely no sheep is worth a human life!" but that's not the way the shepherd saw it.
- I. Thankfully, that's not the way Jesus sees it either. If we were in His shoes, we might well question whether we were worth the life of the Son of God, but there's never been any doubt in the mind of our Shepherd. Not only is He willing to die for us, He has already died for us. It's hard to believe when we think about it, but it really happened. On the cross of Calvary, the Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep.

II. John 10:14-29.

- A. Jesus outlines further implications of His shepherdhood when He talks about His plans for **OTHER SHEEP**. We see this portion of the discussion recorded for us in John 10:14-17. As Jesus mentioned before, He knows who His sheep are, and His sheep know Him. There is something in both sheep and Shepherd that the other instinctively realizes, a connection so great that Jesus compares it to the connection that He shares with the Father. However, the extent of Jesus' sheep is greater than anyone realizes at that point. He says that He has other sheep elsewhere who will also recognize His voice, and will join themselves to His flock under Him.
- B. This discussion is extremely important to us. In this passage, Jesus is obviously discussing the way that the nations of the Gentiles will also hear His gospel and obey Him. As the New Testament makes quite clear, in the church, there were neither Jews nor Gentiles anymore, only Christians. For those of us who are Gentiles, this is tremendously comforting, because it shows that Jesus loves us too, even though we are not of the nation of Israel. We can be brought into His church as well, and be as much His sheep as any other.
- C. Finally, though, Jesus reveals to us what the meaning and implications are of **HEARING HIS VOICE**. This text appears a little later in the chapter. In context, Jesus' enemies are after Him again. They're demanding that He tell them plainly if He is the Christ. Jesus begins His reply by essentially saying "A) I've told you so already, and B) I've done miracles that no man can do without God, so what do you think?" After this, we see the rest of His reply in John 10:25-29. In the first place, this passage is important because it tells us who can be a sheep of Jesus. It's not that Jesus picks His sheep out beforehand, and all the other sheep who want to be His just can't be. Instead, all we have to do to be a sheep of Jesus is hear His voice and follow Him. That's it. It doesn't matter who we are. It doesn't matter where we've come from. It doesn't matter what we've done. If we hear Jesus and follow Him, we are His sheep.
- D. Second, though, this passage describes the benefits of being a sheep of Jesus. Jesus tells us that He gives eternal life to His sheep. This is the solution to the biggest problem of mankind. As we can tell just by observing the world around us, if the natural world continues, sooner or later, all of us will die. Worse still, as we read about sin in God's word, we learn that all of us are already spiritually dead. Jesus promises us life in both senses. We are saved from the death of sin when we call upon the name of the Lord in baptism, and when the Day of Judgment arrives, we shall be saved from physical death forever when Jesus resurrects us. As long as we remain His sheep, we shall never perish.
- E. Furthermore, we can stay His sheep for as long as we want to be, because Jesus promises us that nothing will snatch us out of His hand. Apparently, it was not uncommon for predators to waltz right up to the shepherd and rip a lamb out of his hands like a linebacker strips the ball from a running back. Jesus says, "That's not going to happen to you." Not Satan, not death, not anything has the power to take us away from Jesus, because if Jesus Himself were not enough, He has the Father behind Him, and nobody can mess with God. That doesn't mean that we can't leave. We can always jump out of Jesus' hand and run away if we choose. But it does mean this: that as long as we stay with our Shepherd, we are guaranteed to be safe.

Conclusion. If you want Jesus to be your Shepherd, hear His voice today.