

John 10:1-21
Ezekiel 34
Psalm 23

“I Am the Good Shepherd”

July 5, 2020

What does it mean when Jesus says that he is the good shepherd?
Ezekiel 34 is an important part of the background for this image.

Three thousand years ago God called a shepherd boy to be king.
In 2 Samuel 5:2,
all the tribes of Israel gathered at Hebron and declared that David should be king.
David had delivered Israel from the Philistines,
and God had promised that David “shall be shepherd of my people Israel.”

What did it mean that David would “shepherd...my people Israel”?
Well, a shepherd leads his flock,
feeds his flock,
and defends his flock from their enemies.
Sheep are pretty helpless.

A shepherd who leads and feeds – but doesn’t defend –
has just fattened up the sheep for the slaughter!

We’ll sing Psalm 23 in just a minute –
because in Psalm 23, David declares that he himself is a sheep.
“Yahweh is my shepherd; I shall not want.”
What does Yahweh do as shepherd?
He feeds him in green pastures;
He leads him to still waters;
And Yahweh protects and defends him—
even through the valley of deep darkness—
the valley where wolves and robbers might await at any step.

So when David is identified as a shepherd of Israel,
he is identified as the one who will lead, feed, and defend his people,
just like Yahweh leads, feeds and defends David.

But even before David,
Jacob had called God the Shepherd in Genesis 49:24.
The twelve sons of Jacob were living as shepherds in Egypt at the time,
but he tells them that God is the Shepherd who will lead them and protect them.
In Psalm 80, God is called “the Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!”
In Psalm 28, David cries out “Oh, save your people and bless your heritage!
Be their shepherd and carry them forever.”

So sometimes God is called the shepherd of Israel,
and sometimes David and his sons are called the shepherd of Israel.

But there was a problem.

The shepherds of Israel were not leading, feeding, or defending the sheep.
Even before Ezekiel, Jeremiah 50:6 says “My people have been lost sheep.
Their shepherds have led them astray...they have forgotten their fold.
All who found them have devoured them.”

Jeremiah 23 says “woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!”
Since the sons of David had “scattered my flock and have driven them away,”
God declared that he would drive them away,
and replace them with shepherds “who will care for them.”

But the most devastating critique of the shepherds comes from Ezekiel 34.

Shepherds are supposed to feed the sheep—not slaughter them!

“The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed,
the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back,
the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.”

Because the sons of David have “fed themselves and have not fed my sheep,”
therefore God says that he will rescue his sheep from their mouths.

Yahweh declares that “I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.

As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep
that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep.”

God promises that he will feed his sheep and protect them.

“And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them.

And I, Yahweh, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them.”

God promises that he will come and be the shepherd who seeks out his sheep and defends them.

Sing Psalm 23

Read John 9:35-10:21

Perhaps because of all the chaos of our day,

I am all the more sensitive to the theme of *protection* from predators.

The scripture is abundantly clear that a shepherd *leads* his flock, *feeds* his flock,
and *protects* his flock.

But if you think about it, the central theme of John 10 is *protection*.

Sheep have lots of predators – and many of them are named in this passage:
thieves and robbers (or insurrectionists) in verses 1 and 8;
strangers in verse 5;
and wolves in verse 12;

hired hands aren't quite predators – but they are useless as protection (v12-13).

In our day there can be a tendency to think that “I can protect myself!”

“I don't need anyone to protect me!”

But what happens when you try to handle all of life's dangers and difficulties alone?

I'm not strong enough!

Isn't that the lesson of all the superhero movies?

Even Superman faces his kryptonite!

Jesus says:

“I am the good shepherd.”

Ezekiel had said that God himself would be the shepherd who rescued the flock.

But as we saw last week, the Pharisees didn't think that they needed rescuing.

Jesus has just opened the eyes of the man born blind.

At the end of chapter nine he declares that he has come to blind the Pharisees.

And that is exactly what he goes on to do.

After having declared the sin and guilt of the Pharisees,

Jesus starts talking about sheep.

He has come to rescue his flock from the false shepherds who devour the sheep.

Introduction: The Shepherd and the Door (v1-6)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. ² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

In verses 1-5 Jesus lays out a parable – a saying.

He will explain it more fully in the following verses.

Here let me just highlight the way that Jesus speaks of his *voice*.

The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd –

and they follow him because they *know his voice*.

I had a chance to watch this in Eritrea.

There was a shepherd across the valley with his flock.

My friend and I could see the flock streaming down the hillside,

with the shepherd walking in their midst.

“Leading,” for him, did not mean walking out in front.

It meant walking in their midst.

And they were trotting along beside – in front – and behind –
and they knew the way to go
because not only did he lead them by *walking*
he also led them by *talking*.
They knew his voice – and they heard the direction his voice was going!

Whenever I teach at Mid-America Reformed Seminary
I always make a point of reminding my students that no matter what they say,
their congregations will not go where they *tell them to go*,
rather, the flock will go *where the shepherd goes*.

If the shepherd says to the sheep: “You guys go over there!”
But he walks the opposite direction – where will the sheep be?

Jesus’ sheep know *his voice*.

You need to make sure that you know the voice of Jesus.

I do my best to speak to you with *his voice* –
but I am not Jesus.

It’s part of why I preach the way I do.

I am convinced that the Scriptures speak with the authentic voice of Jesus.

It’s not the “red-letters” of the Bible that give us the voice of Jesus.

The whole Word of God gives us the voice of Jesus!

That’s why I have preached through every book of the Bible –
and that’s why I’m planning on doing it again!

I’m not sure that I’ll have time to make it all the way through again!
That would take another 20 years.

There is a certain irony in our text, though:

⁶ *This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

The sheep know the voice of the good shepherd –
but they haven’t the faintest idea what he is talking about.

So Jesus explains it (for once).

He does so with four statements, each beginning “ego eimi.”

Last week we heard Jesus declare plainly that “I am” (*ego eimi*) –
unequivocally declaring that he is the Yahweh of the Exodus.

Now he affirms repeatedly “I am.”

Twice he says “I am the door” and twice he says “I am the good shepherd”

1. “I Am the Door” – Protection Against Predators (v7-10)

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.

What does it mean that Jesus is the door?

He has already said that those who enter the sheepfold by another way are but thieves and robbers.

Here he points out that the sheep do not listen to thieves and robbers.

As he will say later, “my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” Jesus is the door.

So Jesus says again:

⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

The image is that of the sheepfold.

The sheep must go both in and out.

At night they must go in to be safe from the wild beasts,
And in the morning they must go out to find pasture.

Very often in the ancient world,
the shepherd would lie down and sleep in the entrance of the sheepfold.

You could not get in or out – without climbing over the shepherd!

What do we experience here?

We experience protection from predators.

There are those who would steal and kill and destroy.

There are predators who are looking for isolated sheep who are easy prey.

What sort of predators is Jesus talking about?

Well, who are “all who came before me”?

Think back to Ezekiel 34.

Who were the “shepherds” of Ezekiel 34?

The kings and princes of Israel.

Those who were *supposed* to be shepherds!

Shepherds who were *supposed* to be caring for the flock –
but instead were *eating* the flock!

You can take this in a political direction –
people have often sought for a political savior –
someone who will deliver them from their troubles.
If you vote for me, I'll solve all your problems!

But there is a long history of political messiahs
who wound up stealing, killing, and destroying.

The French Revolution just had to kill the king –
and a few of the aristocracy –
and then anyone who supported them –
and then anyone who opposed us –
and then the guy who started all the killing...

But the shepherd image is also used in the NT of pastors and elders who “shepherd the flock.”
The warning of Ezekiel 34 comes to me and my fellow elders.
Remember how the good shepherd laid down his life for the sheep.
That is the calling of all those who would shepherd the flock of Jesus!

How do you avoid predators?
Stay with the shepherd!
Stay with the flock.
Don't get isolated.
Don't run off by yourself – alone and unprotected!

In contrast, Jesus says,
The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.
I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Think about that!
Not just “that they might survive”! –
but that they might have life – and have it abundantly!

This also reminds us of the language of Ezekiel 34:
“I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land,
so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods.
And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing,
and I will send down the showers in their season;
they shall be showers of blessing...”

Abundant life means security and protection in the enjoyment of God
and of all the blessings of heaven!

Jesus is the door, because he is the only way to life.

But not only is Jesus the door, he is also the shepherd.

2. “I Am the Good Shepherd” – the Father, the Son, and “My Own” (v11-15)

¹¹ *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.* ¹² *He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.* ¹³ *He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.* ¹⁴ *I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,* ¹⁵ *just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.*

“I am the good shepherd” (11-13)

The door was contrasted with thieves and robbers.

Now the shepherd is contrasted with the hired hand.

“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Nobody realizes yet that Jesus is speaking literally.

They think that it is figurative.

When we say that a husband must lay down his life for his wife,
we rarely mean it literally.

But this is what the prophet Zechariah had said in Zech 13:7, when he declared,

“Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.”

Jesus cites this in Matthew 26:31 as referring to himself.

Zechariah had also said (13:1),

“On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David,
and the inhabitants of Jerusalem,
to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.”

If you connect Zechariah 13, Matthew 26 and John 10,
you start to realize something.

It is only if the shepherd *actually* lays down his life for his people that they will be saved.

The hired hand runs away from the wolf, and the wolf destroys the people.

The good shepherd is killed by the wolf...?

How does that work?!

If the wolf kills the good shepherd, won't the sheep become vulnerable?!

That doesn't seem to make sense.

But Jesus isn't finished yet.

And he says for a second time, “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;
and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

The good shepherd *knows* his own.
And they know him.

There is a very *particular* focus of this statement.
Jesus *knows* his own.
He knows those who belong to him.

And if you want to understand how particular:
“just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”

There is, certainly, a quality in the way the Triune God knows
that cannot be attained by the creature!
But the parallel is clearly established here!

How does Jesus know you? How do you know Jesus?
Just like the Father knows the Son, and the Son knows the Father.

He became all that we are by nature, so that we might become all that he is by grace!

We are joined to the life of God himself!

How?
Because “I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Ordinarily, the way you protect the sheep is by fighting off their enemies.
Jesus protects the sheep by dying at the hands of their enemies!

It is only through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross
that he can defeat the predators that were against us.

Yes, John’s gospel emphasizes how Jesus is the Savior of the world!
But John’s gospel also emphasizes how Jesus lays down his life *for the sheep* –
not for the goats, not for the wolves –
but for the sheep –
for those whom he *knows* – for those who *know him*.

He *is* the Savior of the World –
because at the final judgment, the world *will* be saved.
But that does not mean that every individual will be saved.
Those who refuse to believe in Jesus will perish.
Those who think that they see – when in fact they are blind –

the blind who lead the blind into the pit...

The blood of Christ does not pay for their sins –
not because it is lacking in power! (by no means!)
the blood of Christ is a full and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world –
but it is only efficient – it is only applied to the hearts of the *sheep*.

Jesus has been emphasizing his relation to the Father.
But now he connects his relation to the Father with his atoning work.
The Son knows his people, just like the Father knows the Son;
just as God was David's shepherd, and David was Israel's shepherd.

But Jesus is greater than David.
Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.
He will die so that they might live.

And what is more:

3. "I Have Other Sheep" – the Cross and the Mission to the Gentiles (v16-18)

¹⁶ *And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*

Jesus is speaking of the Gentiles.

When he says that he lays down his life for the sheep,
he wants to make it clear that he has more sheep out there.

The OT often spoke of how the blessing of Abraham would extend to the nations.
But many Jews in his own day conveniently ignored that.

But Isaiah had spoken of this:

When Isaiah spoke of foreigners joining themselves to Yahweh,
he declared that God would bring them to the temple in Jerusalem,
"For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares,
I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered." (56:7-8)

Now Jesus is bringing this to pass.

But notice that Jesus does not have "two flocks."
There will be *one flock, one shepherd*.

There are lots of different folds.

A sheepfold is a particular place for a particular group of sheep.
But no matter how many different folds there may be,
there is only one flock.

Jesus has only one Church.

It's why we confess "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."

And Jesus concludes with a striking comment about his relation to the Father:

¹⁷ *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may 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 I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."*

Usually, when a shepherd dies protecting the sheep,
the result is that the sheep are ravaged and destroyed.

But Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

When *he* lays down his life for the sheep,
something remarkable is going to happen!

He won't stay dead!

He had to die – in order to take the sins of his people upon himself.
He had to die – as the sacrifice that took the wrath and curse of God upon himself.
But if his death is going to become efficacious for his people,
then he can't stay dead!

And Jesus says that he has authority to lay down his life – and authority to take it up again.

Did God raise Jesus from the dead?

Or did Jesus rise of his own authority?

Yes.

"This charge I have received from my Father."

The Father and the Son and the Spirit – after all – are *one God*,
the same in substance, equal in power and authority.

The Father has given the Son to have life in himself (John 5)

Therefore, when the Son takes up his life again,
that is the same as saying that the Father raised him from the dead!

We need to remember that *nothing* happens outside of the scope of God's purpose and plan.

As one commentator put it,

The death of Jesus "must not be taken as an accident of fate
or merely as a tragedy perpetuated by misguided men,
but as the Father's plan." (Carson, 389)

God knows what he is doing.

I realize that sometimes those words may not be very comforting.

"He knows what he is doing? I wish he'd tell me!!"

Whenever you don't understand what God is doing,
look at Jesus – look at the cross –
look at the one who laid down his life for you –
and trust *him* that he will bring you through!

The response of the Jews shows that there was again a division among them.

Conclusion: Division Among the Jews (v19-21)

¹⁹ *There was again a division among the Jews because of these words.* ²⁰ *Many of them said, "He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?"* ²¹ *Others said, "These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"*

No prophet ever spoke like this before.

The prophets spoke of God's authority,
but Jesus speaks of his own authority.
He is opening the eyes of the blind,
and blinding the eyes of those who see.

The Jews were divided.

The Pharisees themselves could not make up their minds about this man.
Many were convinced that he had a demon,
but others, and it appears that Nicodemus was foremost among them (7:50),
were troubled: "These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon.
Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

Do you hear the voice of Jesus?

The Good Shepherd calls you.
"For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see,
and those who see may become blind." (9:39)

Do you see?