



'I Am the Good Shepherd'

The life of a Palestinian shepherd was very hard. Constant vigilance, fearless courage and patient love for his flock were absolutely necessary. His equipment was very simple. He had his srip – a bag made of animal skin in which he carried his food. He had his sling – both for offence and defence; incidentally, he had no sheep dog, so, to call back a straying sheep he slung a stone just in front of its nose as a warning to turn back. He had his staff – a short wooden club with a bulge at the end often studded with nails with which he defended himself and his flock against wild beasts and robbers. He had his rod – like a crook with which he could catch and pull back any sheep which was beginning to stray. At evening, when the sheep were going into the fold, he held his rod across the entrance; and every sheep had to pass under it (Lev 27:32); and, as they did, he quickly examined it for any kind of hurt or injury. We keep sheep largely for killing; but in Palestine they were largely kept for their woolen fleece. So they were often with the shepherd for years and therefore known individually, often by name. Sheep are peculiarly helpless animals. Unlike goats (who can look after themselves much better), they are not good foragers or good finders of water. And if they roll onto their back, they cannot get up without help. They can also be so stupid and exasperating.

It is against this background that Jesus said "I am the good Shepherd". Greek has a number of words to convey the idea of goodness. The one used here refers to what is beautiful as well as what is good (we get 'calligraphy' – beautiful handwriting – from this word). So we are being told that there was something attractive, noble and worthy about Jesus' goodness. In him there is more than efficiency and fidelity; there is a certain loveliness. In Hebrews 13:20-21 Jesus is called the "great" Shepherd and in 1 Peter 5:4 the "Chief" Shepherd. In John 10:11-16 we are directed to consider him as the "Good" Shepherd? How is he so?

1. He Died for His Sheep (10:11b, 15b)

Sheep are so helpless that the shepherd must look to all their needs. But Jesus passes over all that and goes straight to one unexpected thing: *"the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"*. In thinking of the welfare of his sheep, the shepherd normally thought of what he could do by his life, not of what he could do by his death. Jesus' attitude was quite different. He put his death in the forefront. That is what the Good Shepherd did. He did not merely risk his life, but laid it down. And there are three aspects of his death indicated here.

- a) **It was Spontaneous:** His death was no accident or tragedy, but was planned before the foundation of the world. It was this for which Christ was born, and it was toward this to which his life deliberately moved. He was not forced to come to this earth or to die. Nevertheless, he both came and died voluntarily for our salvation.
- b) **It was Substitutionary:** Jesus' death had more than merely exemplary significance as a display of love! The fact is that the sheep are in mortal danger; that in their defence the shepherd loses his life; that by his death they are saved.

He died for them – not only "on their behalf," but "in their place." Christ willingly died in our place, taking our punishment, so that we might be set free from sin and its penalty to serve God.

- c) **It was Specific:** Jesus' death was particularly directed to the redemption of *the sheep*. We do not know precisely who comprise his sheep but Jesus does know them and died for them. The result of this is that he literally paid the penalty for their sins and theirs only, with the further result that they are now fully justified with and accepted by God.

2. He Cares for His Sheep (10:12-13)

Jesus contrasts the attitude of the hired help. Although a true shepherd will not normally die for sheep, he will certainly run into danger for them and put up a fight for them. But the man whose interest is in his life rather than the sheep in his care will think of his own skin and take no risks. When he sees the wolf coming he simply runs away. That one wolf could do considerable damage to the flock. Quite apart from the sheep that he seized and tore, his coming would scatter the remainder, and in due course they would have to be found and brought back. So typically the hired man did less than the shepherd who owned the sheep. And Jesus was saying that this arises from the nature of the case: the man whose interest is in pay will always react differently from the man whose interest is in sheep. It was second nature to a real shepherd to think of them before he thought of himself. But the false shepherd came into the job simply and solely for the pay he could get out of it; and was more committed to his own well-being than to the well-being of the sheep. So "when he saw the wolf coming" – when there was danger to his own skin, he retired forthwith and abandoned the sheep to their devices – simply because he was "a hired hand and cared nothing for the sheep". Jesus was the good shepherd, who so loved his sheep that for their safety he would risk, and one day give, his life. And if he was prepared to do that, we can be sure he is prepared to do whatever else is necessary for our spiritual well-being.

3. He knows His Sheep (10:14-15a)

Jesus repeats his words *"I am the Good Shepherd"* and he then adds *"I know my own and my own know me"*. Palestinian shepherds knew their sheep very well – so well, indeed, that they would respond to his call and follow him, while they would not respond to the call of other people (10:5). Jesus likens the mutual knowledge between him and his sheep to that between him and his Father (10:15). There is no possibility of mistake in that knowledge. The Father and the Son know each other intimately. And Jesus is saying that the mutual knowledge of the Good Shepherd and the sheep is something like that. That is not to say that the sheep know the Shepherd as well as the Son knows the Father. It is the reciprocal knowledge that Jesus is stressing. It is not only that Jesus knows us, but that we know him. And there is great comfort in this. Jesus knows us all intimately – with all our differences, needs and circumstances. He knows our past with all its failure and sin – yet he still loves us and shepherds us as his own – prepared to have a close and intimate relationship with us to give us confidence for the future. Since he knows us and desires us to know him too, we can trust him for all that comes our way and be assured that if we follow him he will lead and guide us aright. Jesus goes on to say again *"I lay down my life for the sheep"*. Knowing us as we really are – he still is prepared to give himself for us – to go to the ultimate for us.

4. He Gathers His Sheep (10:16)

He goes on to speak of *"other sheep"* not of the "fold" of Judaism. Now and then in the Gospels there are glimpses of the wider application of the Gospel – as here. The death of Jesus was for people every-where, not only for Jews. And he says *"I must bring them too"*. Here is a compelling necessity. He had come on a mission of salvation, which meant dying for sinners and effectually bringing them to himself. These "other sheep" would be on the same footing as those already in the fold. *"They will hear my voice"* indicates that they will be in the same intimate relationship to the Shepherd as those already following him. Some in the early NT Church reckoned that when Gentiles were converted they must also be circumcised and become Jews. But Jesus was saying no such thing. For him the important thing was that these sheep would hear his voice. And when they did *"there will be one flock, one shepherd"*. The unity that links all believers is a unity that arises because of their relationship to the one Shepherd – all the sheep hear, answer and obey one shepherd. The unity is not ecclesiastical but a unity of faith – of commitment and loyalty to Jesus Christ. Are you one of those "other sheep"? Do you know the Lord Jesus as your Shepherd? Can you, with David, say with assurance *"The Lord is **my** Shepherd"*? It is a terrible thing to be lost in the world without the Shepherd's love, protection and care.

Finally, the "other sheep" must be gathered in. Here is the tremendous missionary task of the Church. Jesus generally uses those who are his to engage in gathering in the whole flock. Are you following the Shepherd in this regard too?

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