

15. The Shepherd And His Sheep

We briefly touched on the Shepherd and Sheep motif in the previous chapter on the parable of The Sheep and The Goats. Now we shall consider this in more detail. In John chapter 10, we have the account of Jesus' allegory of the Good Shepherd and his Sheep. He spoke these words while he was teaching in the temple courts in Jerusalem during the autumn and winter months of 32 AD, during his final six months of ministry.

Like much of Jesus' teaching, it was aimed not only at those who were following him as disciples, but it was also aimed at the religious leaders, who were also listening to his teaching, as a rebuke to them.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were called the sheep of his pasture, while the leaders were referred to as shepherds (e.g. Ezekiel 34; Zechariah 11). The good shepherds were true servants of God who walked in righteousness and truth, teaching the people to obey the commandments. The false, wicked shepherds were those who did the opposite, leading the people astray from God's ways and his covenant with them, abusing and deceiving the flock of God; encouraging the people to follow the traditions of men rather than the actual words of Yahweh himself via his prophets.

David was actually a shepherd boy before he became the king of Israel, and as a shepherd-king he was a type of the Messiah, the greater Son of David, Jesus himself. The well-known 23rd Psalm of David uses the imagery of a shepherd and his sheep, which David would've been very familiar with being a shepherd himself. He pictured Yahweh as his Shepherd, and himself as a sheep from God's flock.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters.

(Psalm 23:1-2 NIV)

In fact, there are a number of Psalms that spoke of God as the Shepherd and the people of Israel as the sheep of his pasture, the flock under his care (e.g. Psalm 95:7; 80:1; 100:3). In Psalm 119:176 the writer refers to himself as a lost sheep that has strayed from the ways of God (see also Isaiah 53:6 for a similar thought). Jesus also was to echo the words of the prophets when he spoke about *'the lost sheep of the house of Israel'* as those to whom he was initially sent, and that they were *'like sheep without a shepherd'* (see Matthew 9:36; 10:6; 15:24; Luke 15:1-7).

This figure had been applied in quite some detail in the earlier prophecies of Ezekiel and Jeremiah in the 6th century BC. At that time, Yahweh had already rebuked the leaders of Israel and Judah for their wickedness, hypocrisy and disobedience, which had previously resulted in the Assyrian captivity of the Northern kingdom of Israel in the 8th century BC; and these same things were about to lead to the captivity of Judah in Babylon. Yet God also promised that he would raise up a shepherd to care for them, and that he would restore them to the land of Israel

when the captivity was over, the land being described as the pastureland. This is such a crucial point that it's worth quoting the following from Ezekiel chapter 34.

"The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against **the shepherds of Israel**; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! **Should not shepherds take care of the flock?** You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. **You have ruled them harshly and brutally.** So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. **My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill.** They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them...

...For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: **I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep.** I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. **I will tend them in a good pasture,** and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. **I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD.** I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. **I will shepherd the flock with justice....**

... I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken...

... You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD.' "

(Ezekiel 34:1-6, 11-16, 23-24, 31 NIV; see also Jeremiah 23:1-6)

These things were fulfilled in a lesser sense during the restoration from the seventy-year captivity in Babylon when Davidic leaders such as Zerubbabel and Nehemiah were the good shepherds of Israel, along with priests such as Joshua and Ezra, and prophets like Zechariah and Haggai. Yet these things were to have their greater and more ultimate fulfilment in Jesus himself as the King-Messiah of Israel and the world, with the complete fulfilment of these prophecies occurring within his heavenly kingdom. This is precisely what the NT writers were revealing through the Holy Spirit — the fulfilment of these things in 1st century events.

During the early period of the restoration from Babylon, the prophet Zechariah prophesied about two shepherds. The good shepherd represented Christ, while the foolish shepherd represented either king Herod or the High Priest Caiaphas (see Zechariah 11:4-17). Again, we have the figure of a shepherd leader of Israel (whether good or bad) pasturing the flock of God. And it is also interesting to note

that shepherds were viewed as having a lowly and humble station in life, so the good shepherd is to have a humble heart and spirit.

It is no coincidence that when the great Shepherd of Israel was born, the first among the people who were told about the birth via angelic visitation were shepherds out in the fields near Bethlehem. Even more significantly, these humble shepherds were probably among those who were pasturing the flocks that were especially bred to be used for the sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. These privileged shepherds were among the first to see the great Shepherd and Passover Lamb on the night of his humble birth (see Luke 2:8-20). And it was these shepherds who were also the first ones to evangelise the people of Bethlehem with the good news of Christ's birth. So even the events of Jesus' birth spoke of his coming role as the humble, yet mighty, Shepherd-King of Israel, the greater son of David.

Here is what Matthew recorded in his gospel in relation to the visitation of the Magi and Jesus' birth.

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "**In Bethlehem in Judea,**" they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

" 'But you, **Bethlehem**, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; **for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.**' "

(Matthew 2:3-6 NIV)

The Jewish priests and rabbis answered king Herod by quoting the messianic prophecy from Micah 5:2 about the coming Shepherd-King who would come out of Bethlehem and the line of David, and this prophecy was being fulfilled at that time in Yeshua-Jesus himself, who was born in Bethlehem of the family of king David, the original shepherd-king. Not only so, but Jesus would also fulfil these prophecies; that as the Son of Yahweh, the true Israel, he would be called out of Egypt (cf. Matthew 2:14-15; Hosea 11:1) and he would be connected to Nazareth¹ and the Galilee region (Matthew 2:21-23; 4:12-17; Isaiah 11:1 & Zechariah 3:8; Isaiah 9:1-2).

[The Sheep and the Sheep Pen](#)

So with all this in mind, let us now turn our attention to what Jesus taught in John 10.

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter **the sheep pen** by **the gate**, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is **the shepherd of his sheep**. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

(John 10:1-3 NIV)

Jesus begins by using the analogy of a sheep pen, where shepherds would keep their flocks temporarily under the guard of a watchman. Thieves and robbers would climb over the walls to steal the sheep, whereas the shepherds would enter the pen by the gate, where the watchman was in charge as a sort of security guard. Only a legitimate shepherd would use the gate so he could rightly enter the pen to call and lead out his own flock, for there could be more than one flock in the pen.

Jesus was indicating here that the sheep pen was the religion of Old Covenant Judaism, with the flocks of sheep representing the Jewish people. The shepherds were the true servants and prophets of God, while the thieves were the false prophets and messiahs who were not legitimately sent by God.

In particular, Jesus was the ultimate Prophet-King-Priest — the Messiah, the great Anointed One — so in a special sense, he alone had the right, as the Good Shepherd, to enter the pen through the gate of his Davidic ancestry, and the great prophet-watchman, John the Baptist, had opened up the way for him. Let us continue.

"When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, **and his sheep follow him because they know his voice**. 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 they did not understand what he was telling them.

(John 10:4-6 NIV)

The sheep would only follow their shepherd-owner due to recognising his voice, and they would not follow a false shepherd who was a stranger, but instead the flock would run away from him for they would not recognise a stranger's voice.

Jesus was saying that those sheep who know him as their Messiah-Shepherd would listen to his voice as he calls them out of the sheep pen of Old Covenant Judaism, and they would then begin to follow him as disciples as he leads them into the spiritual kingdom of God. It is interesting to note that eastern shepherds would *lead* their flock to pasture, going ahead of them, rather than driving the flock from behind as often occurs in western lands. In every way, Jesus has gone before us to lead us into the kingdom, the spiritual pastureland of God.

Yet amazingly, those who were listening to this allegorical teaching of Jesus didn't understand what he was saying, so he began to elaborate a little further.

Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, **I am the gate for the sheep**. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. **I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved**. He 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.**"

(John 10:7-10 NIV)

Instead of focusing on himself as the Shepherd at this point, Jesus continued by likening himself to the Gate or Door! He is the only Way to the Father, the only Way to Life, the only Way into the Kingdom of Heaven. He is the Messiah — or put

another way, the messianic Gate. All others were, and are, impostors and false messiahs, but the true sheep of God will only listen to the voice of his Son.

Jesus is the only Way into the pastureland of the kingdom, the only way to be saved from sin and death. Through him, his sheep can find true freedom and salvation. They can come out of the Old Covenant system of the Law and into the New Covenant of Grace. The pasture represents the spiritual blessings and fruit of the Spirit that a believer can have access to. All those who are false are thieves, who come to steal, kill and destroy, while the true Messiah (or Christ) came to give fullness of life, the life of the ages, to his flock. Only in Christ Jesus can we truly find peace, healing, life and spiritual blessing - both now and for the ages to come.

It is possible that Jesus may also have been alluding to the Sheep Gate, one of the northern gates into Jerusalem, by applying some spiritual significance to it, as it was one of the primary gates where the sheep and lambs were herded through for the temple sacrifices — which looked ahead to his own Sacrifice as the Passover Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (cf. John 1:29; 5:2; 1 Corinthians 5:7). So here we have the Great Shepherd who would lay down his life as a sheep-lamb so that he could be the Gate into the heavenly Jerusalem.

The Good Shepherd versus the Hired Hand

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

(John 10:11-13 NIV)

Jesus refers to himself as the *Good Shepherd*, in contrast to the many bad shepherds who were leading Israel at the time. He is a Shepherd-King who truly cares for his sheep, and he seeks only that which is beneficial to the ultimate well being of those under his care. His love is so complete that he lays down his own life and soul for the sake of his sheep. Jesus' whole ministry was about love and sacrifice in obedience to his God and Father, culminating in the death of the cross, fulfilling the role of the Stricken Shepherd (cf. Matthew 26:31-32; Zechariah 13:7).

In contrast to this is the hired hand, the religious leader who doesn't really care for the sheep, who is only there for money or selfish ambition, including lording it over others for personal gain. When the wolf comes, that is, the one with a wicked heart who wishes to deceive the people, who attacks the sheep to persecute or kill them, the hired hand cowardly abandons the flock, and leaves them open to harm, for he cares nothing for the sheep. He's only concerned for himself and saving his own skin or reputation. When the going really gets tough, he does a runner and deserts the sheep. This was a clear rebuke aimed at many of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Jesus' own day.

The apostle Paul also used similar words when he had to warn the Ephesian elders that false brothers would seek to infiltrate their assembly to cause division and sectarianism, and in turn cause others to raise themselves up as leaders with false ulterior motives, distorting the truth, teaching things that would not be in accord with apostolic doctrine.

"Keep watch over yourselves **and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.** I know that after I leave, *savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.* Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

(Acts 20:28-31 NIV)

An overseer (or supervisor; Greek *episkopos*) had a responsibility to watch over, guide, feed and care (i.e. to shepherd; Greek *poimaino*) the flock or Assembly of God and to protect the people from dangerous and deceptive brethren. Paul was so concerned for these Christian brothers and sisters that he had personally warned them all almost continually for three years, often accompanied with tears, about the dangers ahead for them. This is real caring love at work, having a genuine heartfelt concern for God's truth & righteousness, along with a great love for his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. This kind of loyal service to Christ Jesus and his flock is sadly pretty rare these days.

The apostle Peter gave us the true credentials for a spiritual leader of God's people, one who is a good shepherd-overseer like his Master, Jesus, the Chief Shepherd-Overseer (cf. 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4).

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory (*lit. Greek 'about'*) to be revealed: **Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers**—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, *but being examples to the flock.* And when **the Chief Shepherd** appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

(1 Peter 5:1-4 NIV)

The good shepherd is one who is not a hired hand, but a true *pastor-shepherd* (Greek *poimen*) who cares for the flock, who feeds them and guides them with real love and humility and truth, with all righteousness and holiness, seeking to serve God in humble obedience; not lording his authority over others but being an example to those under his care. To those who are faithful in this regard, there awaits the prize of glory, honour and immortality sharing in the kingdom of Christ's inheritance at the establishing of his kingdom at his Royal Appearing — a Glory and Appearing that was imminent when Peter wrote this passage.

More Sheep, One Flock

As we continue with the words of the Chief Shepherd to his apostles, Jesus began to talk about his relationship to his sheep, and he also introduced the concept of there being other sheep out there that were not included in the sheep pen of Judaism.

"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.** The reason my Father loves me is that 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."

(John 10:14-18 NIV)

Jesus again emphasises the fact that he is the Good Shepherd who lay's down his life for the sheep, and that he knows every one of his sheep and they know him also — in the same way as Jesus knows the Father and the Father knows him. He is saying here that all true believers and followers of God know who Jesus really is, and this leads to a special spiritual relationship with him. If we, as sheep, ever doubt his love and care for us because of the harshness of this world and the frailties of our flesh, may we be reminded of these words — that his love is so great he laid down his life for us to bring us freedom and eternal life.

God's love for his Son is paradoxically expressed in, and through, the loving obedience of Christ when he willingly laid down his life as the Passover Lamb. Take note that no one took Jesus' life from him. Ultimately, it wasn't Pilate's decision or the Jewish leaders or Caiaphas or anyone else. It was all because it was God's will, and this authority to lay his life down - and to take it up again in resurrection - was given to him by his Father, whom he willingly obeyed to the very end. Something quite mysterious is being revealed here, coupled with John 2:18-22, and that is; when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus, not only did God raise Jesus from among the dead (e.g. Acts 2:32; 3:13-15), but somehow Jesus himself also had a part to play in his own resurrection to immortality.

Now Jesus also revealed here that he had other sheep that were either in a different sheep pen, or possibly they were not in a pen at all, but they were just scattered around the field of the world, lost, without anyone to guide them or care for them. They too would hear his voice and follow him, and there would be One Flock and One Shepherd. This is extremely important. To the Jewish disciples at that time, the thought that Gentiles would become one with them in the Messiah was hard to accept. Even Peter had to be persuaded by a spiritual vision before he realised this truth (cf. Acts 10), yet this is evidently what Jesus was talking about, and the remainder of the New Testament writings reveal this to be so, especially the writings of Paul.

The truth of Jew and Gentile coming together as One Flock in Christ is made abundantly clear in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Therefore, remember that formerly **you who are Gentiles by birth** and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.**

(Ephesians 2:11-13 NIV)

Jesus had already hinted of this; that the Gentiles, the believing sheep from other nations who belonged to another sheep pen (or just scattered and lost within pagan idolatrous religion), would also hear the call of the Shepherd-King, and there would eventually be One Flock and One Shepherd in the pastureland of the Kingdom of Heaven. This was fulfilled in Christ and his Bride-Church, made up of Jew *and* Gentile. Therefore, these teachings of Christ about his sheep can also be applied to all those who have followed him ever since from amongst the nations of the world (i.e. Christians). Besides this, many of the things that Jesus spoke to ancient Israel can also have relevance to the Christian Church in general - which has also had its fair share of false shepherds and hired hands like Israel of old!

Be that as it may, it is highly probable that Jesus was also indicating that a remnant of lost 'sinners' of the Diaspora of Israel, who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, would also belong to the One Flock under the One Shepherd. This echoed the words of the prophets concerning Israel's ultimate re-gathering, as in the following sample texts.

"I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. **There will be one king over all of them** and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms...

...My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees."

(Ezekiel 37:22, 24 NIV; also Ezekiel 34:11-16, 22-24)

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, **a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.** This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness."

(Jeremiah 23:5-6 NIV)

Yahweh would one day search for the lost sheep of Israel and gather them into his kingdom as one nation (cf. Matthew 18:12-14; Mark 6:34; Luke 12:32). Even though these prophecies had been largely fulfilled in the centuries following the Babylonian restoration of all Israel, their ultimate fulfilment was to be in the Messiah and his kingdom. And it was exactly this fulfilment that Jesus was alluding to throughout his teaching ministry (see John 11:51-52; Matthew 10:6; 15:24; 1 Peter 2:25). The Jews knew what Jesus was saying to them at the time he said this, and this caused widespread division amongst them!

At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

(John 10:19-21 NIV)

"My Sheep Listen To My Voice"

A few months later, during the Feast of Hanukkah (or Dedication), Jesus was again in the temple area in Jerusalem. The Jews were trying to get him to say

plainly whether he was the Messiah or not; and this led to some further teaching on the sheep.

Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, *but you do not believe because you are not my sheep*. **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 can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

(John 10:25-30 NIV)

Jesus made it clear that those who listen to him and believe him and follow him are his sheep. He knows them and they know him. On the other hand, those that don't listen to him or believe him or follow him are not his sheep. He blatantly said to the unbelieving Jews of his day that they did not believe in him because they weren't his sheep. Only the chosen ones of God are the true sheep, and these are the ones termed Overcomers or Conquerors in Revelation chapters 2 & 3.

These are the sons of God who have been divinely called and given eternal life. As a consequence of this calling, they will never perish or be destroyed when facing the ultimate judgment of God. They were no longer lost sheep, but they had been found and saved. No one can snatch these sheep out of Christ's hand, because God the Father, who is greater than all, has given these sheep to Christ, and therefore, they are also God's sheep as well. So no one can snatch them out of God's hand through persecution or death. These also would become shepherds of the kingdom, co-ruling with the Great Shepherd in the impending messianic age.

It was during this discourse that Jesus dropped a bombshell by saying, "*I and the Father are one.*" His listeners knew full well that he was declaring to be the Son of God, the Messiah and Lord, the very one promised in the prophets, having divine origin. In a unique way, he was invoking the very authority of God as the sole King of Israel, raising himself above all other authorities and making himself equal to God. Of course, the Jews who weren't his sheep were enraged at what they thought was absolute blasphemy. And they even attempted to stone him right then, but it was not his time to die, so he was able to escape their grasp.

Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?"

"We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "**but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.**"

...Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.

(John 10:31-33, 39 NIV)

This is the great touchstone of truth that reveals who Jesus really is; he is the Messiah, the unique Son of God, the human Image of the Invisible God, sharing the authority and Spirit of the Father; and he lived up to his claim completely, fulfilling the words of the prophets concerning the Messiah. And many of the Jews of his day knew full well what he was declaring, but in their unbelief they rejected him, though they didn't have any good solid reason to do so. This revealed the fact that they

were not his sheep! And I would encourage you, the reader, if you haven't done so already, to follow the voice of this great Shepherd of the sheep, confirming yourself as one who belongs to the one flock of Christ and of God – the sheep that will be led into the glorious pastureland of eternal life in the presence of the Father.

In closing this chapter, let me finish with the words of the writer to the Hebrews.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, **that great Shepherd of the sheep**, equip you with everything good for doing his will, **and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ**, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

(Hebrews 13:20-21 NIV)

May all the lost sheep of God listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd and be led into the new heavenly pastures of the kingdom of God.

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¹ The Hebrew word *nazer*, which is translated *branch* in Isaiah 11:1 and other places, is related to the word Nazareth (*Nazeroth*). Hence, Yeshua (Jesus) the Nazarene is also Jesus the Branch. Source: *Isaiah's Use of the word "Branch" or Nazarene* by Fred. P Miller.