

# The Shepherd in the Manger

John 10

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Some of the most beloved passages in the Bible are passages that talk about the relationship between a shepherd and sheep. Many people know the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which begins with, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...” That psalm was written by David, who was a shepherd himself, so we hear in his words the tenderness and care he had for his sheep. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm describes the way the Lord cares for His people with a similar tenderness and care.

Even though we live in a farming community, sheep are still relatively foreign to most of us. We’re familiar with cattle, maybe pigs and chickens, but most people around us don’t raise sheep, so we don’t have nearly as good of a frame of reference for them. That’s what is kind of fun about the video we showed tonight. It gives us a glimpse into what working with sheep is like. In short, I imagine working with sheep is frustrating! I do find it interesting that he compared working with sheep to something with which I’m quite familiar...working with children!

Sheep seem to do dumb things. They get themselves into trouble constantly if you aren’t keeping an eye on them. I love that he says that sheep are the kind of animals who will walk off a cliff just because it’s there! It takes the right kind of person to be able to care for a creature that requires so much hands-on effort just to keep them safe.

That is why I think it instructive that one of the Lord’s common analogies for our relationship to Him is that we are like sheep. If we’re honest with ourselves, we tend to get into trouble if we don’t have someone keeping an eye on us. Just like sheep, we have a tendency to walk off “cliffs” just because they are there. How many times have we gotten into trouble just because we wanted to see what happened when we did something? How often will someone tell us what we need to do, but we feel the need to test the waters just to see if it’s really true? It’s like someone telling you that something is really hot—I know some of us will be tempted to touch it, just to make sure...and then act surprised when we get burned! Or when someone says that something smells terrible, isn’t there a part of you that will try to take a whiff just to see if it’s really as bad as they say? When you see a wet paint sign, don’t you feel compelled to touch it just to see? Is there any wonder that the Lord often describes us as being like sheep?

Tonight I want to talk a little bit about our “sheep-ness” and the Lord’s “shepherd-ness”. When we think of the nativity scene, we think of Mary and Joseph, maybe some livestock, the shepherds to whom the angels spoke, and the wise men. But I want to remind you that there was another shepherd present in Bethlehem—He was lying in the manger. As we celebrate Christmas, I want to remind you of how that baby born in Bethlehem is our Good Shepherd who is worthy of our worship.

## **We the Sheep**

As I mentioned, the Bible talks an awful lot about the sheep/shepherd relationship. Inevitably, we are described as sheep and the Lord is described as our shepherd. There's good reason for this. Just as we are apt to ignore the advice we receive from other people in favor of trusting our own judgment, so too are we apt to ignore God's commands in order to do what our hearts desire.

In one of the great passages in the Bible that tells us in advance about how the Messiah would sacrifice Himself for us, we read a bit about our similarity to sheep,

All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. (Isaiah 53:6a, NLT)

This is a pretty good description of the human race as a whole. We leave God's paths to follow our own. We see this everywhere in our world today, don't we? We redefine morality to fit the current trends in our culture. We pick and choose which of God's commands we want to emphasize, and ignore the ones that we don't like. When I was in college, a friend of mine had what I thought was a million-dollar idea. He called it the cut and paste Bible. You could pick and choose which parts of the Bible you want to include and which parts you want to cut out, and then they'd bind up your new, customized Bible and send it to you. Then you'd have a Bible that affirmed what you wanted it to affirm and didn't condemn anything you didn't want condemned.

This seems like a silly (and sacrilegious) concept, but isn't that how many of us actually live our lives? Think about the things you know God has said not to do that you do anyway. We know what God has said, but we choose to go our own way instead. This is exactly what sheep do. So it's no wonder that God refers to us this way time and time again.

When we recognize that we are like sheep, who constantly rebel against the Lord, we also understand something else—the Lord has every right to turn His back on us.

Lots of people imagine that they are basically good people. They think that they are better than (or at least as good as) those around them. There's a problem with this line of thought though—we are comparing ourselves to other sheep! Being proud of being as good as the other sheep is kind of like someone being proud that they were the best inmate on death row. While that may be true, it's not much of an accomplishment!

Here's what we have to understand. Every single person on the face of the earth is like a sheep who chooses to wander from their shepherd. Left to our own devices, we are in great danger. Our only hope is to return to the safety offered by our shepherd...but we can't do that on our own. We've made that clear by our actions many times over.

## **The Good Shepherd**

Let's be honest, if we had to deal with people like us all the time, we might be tempted to just give up on them—to write them off and leave them to their own devices. We'd be

tempted to tell them that they deserve whatever they get—that they've made their bed and now they need to lie in it.

Fortunately for us, that is not how the Lord treats us. Instead, like a loving shepherd, He deals gently and patiently with His sheep, and cares for us even though we seem unwilling to listen.

In the book of John, Jesus tells us about the kind of shepherd He is to His sheep.

<sup>11</sup> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep.

<sup>12</sup> A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. <sup>13</sup> The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep. (John 1:11-13, NLT)

If you have ever run or owned a business (or maybe you know someone who does), you know that even the best employees are not nearly as committed to that business as you are. As an owner, you know you will do whatever it takes to make sure the business succeeds. You'll work late, you'll work nights and weekends, you'll work sick, you'll even work for reduced pay if you think it will help the business succeed. Even your best employees are unwilling to make that kind of commitment to the business.

The same is true on the farm. You may employ great farmhands who are dedicated and committed, but the reality is that they won't have the same kind of commitment as the farmer running the family farm that has been in his family for generations. There's a difference between the hired hand and the one who owns the land (or livestock).

This is how Jesus describes His relationship to His sheep. He is not merely a hired hand; He is the Shepherd. He is committed to His sheep, even to the point of laying down His own life for them. No hired hand would be willing to make such a sacrifice.

This is what is astounding about the Christmas celebration. We recognize that this baby in the manger was also the Good Shepherd who would lay down His life for His sheep. Jesus came to earth to rescue the people who, like sheep, had wandered far from Him.

Why did Jesus need to lay down His life to do that? The reason is that it is only by laying down His life that Jesus could pay the penalty for our rebellion against God. Sin (rebellious against God) always carries consequences with it. One of those consequences is a separation and distance from God. Another is that because God is good, He cannot simply overlook our sin. A good God must punish sin wherever He sees it—even in us.

This means that because of our rebellion against God, we have stored up for ourselves a great deal of punishment. Without the intervention of someone else, we would be separated from God for all of eternity as He punished us in the way our rebellion against Him deserved. But this is where Jesus came in.

Jesus, as our Good Shepherd chose to lay down His life, to sacrifice Himself, to secure our forgiveness. By Jesus sacrificing Himself and taking our punishment, He makes it possible for us to be set free. That's what makes Him such a good Shepherd.

## He Cares for You

In the book of Luke, Jesus tells several parables that all deal with lost things, pointing out that just as we search diligently for something that is lost, so the Lord diligently seeks after those who are lost as well. One of the examples He uses is of a sheep,

<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders <sup>6</sup> and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' <sup>7</sup> I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (Luke 15:3-7, NLT)

Jesus uses the example of a sheep who wanders away, which as we've discovered is a pretty likely occurrence! But Jesus' statement here is somewhat surprising. He tells us that the Lord seeks after His lost sheep. And when He brings them home, He rejoices greatly.

This parable is intended to help us to see just how much the Lord cares for you and me. Sometimes we imagine God as a distant ruler, detached from His people and unconcerned with what is going on in their lives. I think some of this stems from the fact that we often feel that way about our political leaders today. We feel they are out of touch with what life is like for the rest of us, and they don't seem to care about us at all.

Jesus tells us that He does not treat us that way. He cares for us and desires to restore our relationship with God. And He has gone to great lengths to make it possible for that to happen.

I hope you understand this truth. God cares about you. He sees you. He has never turned His back on you. You may be someone who has spent all your life running from God for one reason or another. I hope today you can see how much God loves you and desires for you to come home to Him. You may think you have wandered too far or messed up too badly for the Lord to welcome you back home now, but it just isn't true.

One of the other parables Jesus told right after the parable of the lost sheep is called the prodigal son. One of a man's sons decided that he wanted his inheritance while his dad was still alive, and demanded it from his father (which is akin to wishing his father was dead, because all he really cared about was his dad's money). The father gave it to him, and the son left the family and squandered every last dime. When the money ran out he was at the end of his rope and thought he could at least return home and ask his father for a job, because he knew he didn't deserve to be welcomed home as a son.

When he came home, the father rejoiced and welcomed him back, not as a servant, but as his son. Jesus' point is that this is how our Heavenly Father views you and me. We have rebelled against God and do not deserve to have a restored relationship with Him. And yet, Jesus came to earth so we might be forgiven and restored. It doesn't matter how far you've wandered—what matters is whether you will come back home to the Lord.

If you understand this truth, then you will see that Christmas isn't just a nice story about a baby being born to parents in humble circumstances. It is the story of God's rescue mission! This child in the manger came to rescue as many as possible from the judgment we all deserve.

## **Jesus' Call**

If we return to John 10, where Jesus talks about himself as our Good Shepherd, we see one other truth that I think is important to grasp.

"I tell you the truth, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! <sup>2</sup> But the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup> The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> They won't follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don't know his voice." (John 10:1-5, NLT)

Jesus gives us one other important aspect of the relationship between the Good Shepherd and His sheep that we need to see—namely that His sheep recognize His voice and follow Him.

I once saw a video of how this kind of a relationship is true of a shepherd and his sheep. The shepherd stood out in a field with no sheep visible. But when he called to them, suddenly they came running to Him. They knew his voice—and even more than that, they knew his character. They knew he loved and cared for them, so they should always come running when he called.

I hope you see the parallel here. Jesus has proven His great love for His sheep. He entered our world to offer himself as a sacrifice for our sin and rebellion. He took the punishment that you and I deserved. He has demonstrated His love for us vividly. He calls to each of us, the question is, how will we respond?

Jesus says that those who belong to Him will come running to Him and will follow Him wherever He leads. This is the call Jesus issues to each one of us today. He calls you to trust Him and to follow Him with your life. Christians do this, not because we think it will make Him love us (He already does!), but because we trust Him. We have seen that He desires what is best for us, and so we want to go wherever He leads.

Tonight He calls to you once more. Will you recognize His voice and come to Him, or will you continue to push Him aside and ignore His call?

## **Conclusion**

I bet when you came into the Christmas Eve service tonight, you did not expect to spend most of the evening talking about sheep. But I hope you understand why this is an important reminder for us to have as we celebrate Christmas. We need to remember that this baby in the manger came for a specific purpose. The baby lying in the manger is the Good Shepherd, the One who cares for you and me; the One who makes it possible for us to be forgiven for our constant rebellion against God; the One who loves us so much that He rejoices each time one of His rebellious people returns to Him.

I'm not the greatest gift-giver in the world, but I love to get gifts for my family that I think they'll like. Every once in a while, I end up knocking it out of the park. I get someone a gift that they hadn't even thought of, but they end up loving it. It's a gift they didn't even know they wanted until they got it. There's something wonderfully gratifying about being able to give (or receive) such a gift.

There's a reason why we talk about Jesus coming into the world as the best Christmas present ever. It's because He was the gift we desperately needed, and we didn't even know it. He came to rescue us from our sin, to love us, and to lead us throughout our lives. He came to be our Good Shepherd.

I hope as you celebrate Christmas this year, you will not lose sight of how Jesus is the best Christmas gift ever. He may not be the gift you expected, but He is the gift you need.

Tonight He calls to you to follow Him. I hope you will heed the call, because there is no better place to be than in the care of the Good Shepherd.

If you are someone who has already answered that call, then I hope your Christmas celebration helps to remind you of the reason we celebrate in the first place. We celebrate because Jesus came into the world to save sheep like you and me. He came to do what we couldn't. And Jesus continues to lead us and guide us through life. As we look at the nativity scene, please remember that the baby lying in the manger is also the Good Shepherd, who loves you more than you know.

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