

Jesus, the Good Shepherd
Lesson 10:1-42
by Dellena Ludwig

God often used the example of sheep to describe His relationship with His people in the Old Testament. Psalm 95 is a call to worship the Lord God. In verses 6 and 7 the people of Israel cry, "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care." [Psalm 95:6,7]

Isaiah 40:11 spoke of Jehovah's tender care for His flock. "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." [Isaiah 40:11]

God chose David, when he was a shepherd boy, to be the second and greatest king of Israel. "And the Lord said to you, "You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler." [2 Samuel 5:2b]

But not all of the leaders of Israel were good shepherds before God. They became so influenced by the evil practices around them and by the power they held, that they began to misuse their authority to harm their flock. Ezekiel was charged to give them this announcement from God: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! 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.'" [Ezekiel 34:2,3] Their punishment was exile in Babylon for seventy years.

As we read John chapter 10, we found that the shepherds in the time of Jesus, who were chosen to lead Israel, the flock of the Lord God, were misusing His sheep. They were again functioning as robbers, thieves and cowardly hirelings while holding the position of the shepherds of the Jews. At that time, they were called Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees, and were collectively known as the religious rulers.

In John chapter 10 we will examine how the Lord Jesus challenged them to:

1. Identify Jesus as the Good Shepherd (10:1-16) by comparing Him to the robbers, thieves and hirelings.
2. Identify Jesus as the Good Shepherd (10:17-38) by His works done on behalf of the sheep.
3. Identify Jesus as the Good Shepherd (10:39-42) by seeing His flock grow.

In chapter 9 Jesus healed the man born blind; however, the Pharisees were arguing with Jesus because He had done this miracle on the Sabbath. His encounter with these same religious rulers in chapter 10 was a continuation of this confrontation.

It was quite likely that there would be an actual sheepfold nearby the temple mount, that could be seen by the people as they came to the temple to worship. Since sheep were used in the

sacrifices, shepherds would bring their flocks close to Jerusalem during the feast days and passers-by could see the interaction of the shepherds with their sheep.

So, Jesus used these interactions of sheep husbandry to illustrate His position as the Good Shepherd. First, He pointed out the security of the fold itself. “Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.” [John 10:1,2]

The ancient sheepfold would often be an enclosure wall, made of rocks that would hold one or more flocks of sheep. It only had one door. This was very practical because the shepherd could stand at that door to count and examine each of his sheep as they entered the fold for the night. The sheep could be secure for the night by both the walls surrounding them and the faithful supervision of the under-shepherd whose job it would be to keep watch over them.

In the morning, the shepherd would come to call out his own sheep to take them out into the fields to feed for the day. The “gate-keeper” would certainly know who the true shepherd was, because the shepherds paid him to keep watch of their flocks. It was also obvious that the sheep knew their true shepherd from others because of the way they reacted to him.

Verses 3 and 4 described this recognition. “The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.” [John 10:3,4]

The Pharisees considered themselves to be shepherds of Israel. But were they the true shepherds, appointed by God to care for His flock? Who then were the robbers and thieves in Jesus’ parable? The Pharisees were probably turning this question over in their heads. Was Jesus talking about the Romans who wanted to harm the Jews with their taxes and deadly punishment for laws that might be broken?

The key to this analogy is found in the description in verse 5 of how the sheep reacted to the robbers and thieves.

1. The sheep would never follow a stranger.
2. The sheep run away from strangers.
3. The sheep don’t recognize the voice of strangers.

The Pharisees were the strangers. They didn’t know the sheep. Their attitude of disgust for the people was revealed in chapter 7, verse 49 when they said those who followed Jesus were a “mob that knows nothing of the law – there is a curse on them.” They were described by Jesus in chapter 8 as worldly: “you are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.” (v. 23)

Because they were so intent on killing Him, Jesus revealed their parentage in chapter 8: “You belong to your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.” [John 8:44]

Thieves and robbers want to take from their victims, not help them be restored. Rather than encouraging the healed blind man with congratulations, in chapter 9, they threw him out of the temple courts for daring to lecture them! (9:34)

The Pharisees had demonstrated that most of them did not really care for the sheep they were supposed to be leading. They were actually strangers to God's plan for His sheep. It was not the fault of the sheep that they didn't listen and obey the voice of these leaders. The "leaders" were not acting in the best interest of the sheep because they didn't know the owner of the flock, the Father Himself. The sheep will never follow their strange voices. (v.5)

Verse 6 stated: "Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what He was telling them." [John 10:6] So, Jesus used a slightly different metaphor to explain the difference between His relationship with His followers, and that of the Pharisees, beginning in verse 7. "Therefore Jesus said again, 'Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.'" [John 10:7-9]

This is the second section in this chapter where Jesus began His teaching with the phrase "Very truly I tell you." These words always mark a deeper teaching that He wants His listeners to dig into. What follows was so important that Jesus wanted all of his audience, including the Pharisees, to really listen and get this point: "I am the gate; I am the door."

As we study the book of John we find there are seven instances where John emphasized Jesus' "I am" statements. We took note that in John 6:35 Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life." Then in John 8:12 Jesus said, "I am the Light of the World." In chapter ten we find two more: "I am the gate"; "I am the Good Shepherd." All of the "I am" phrases describe an important character trait through which Jesus reveals Himself to His followers.

Jesus further described the importance of His being the gate to the sheep. "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They 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 10:9,10]

Jesus, the Good Shepherd came not only to care for and keep His sheep safe. He also acts as the gate itself. He places Himself in the opening of the fold to be the barrier for those that want to kill and destroy. But He is not a barred, locked gate to keep His followers as prisoners inside, instead He allows His sheep to come in and out, to find pasture and water and shade on hot days.

A thief would force sheep into containment so they could be killed and sold for his own benefit. My brother at one time, found that he and his family had joined a "church" that said their leaders were actual descendants of the apostles. Those leaders demanded that each member of the congregation must obey their instructions completely, even to the sale of my brother's house to give the proceeds to the church. When my brother also wanted to use some of the money of the sale to help family with medical bills, the leaders excommunicated him and his family for not obeying completely.

That is not the way the Good Shepherd cares for His sheep. He is overjoyed when His sheep prosper. He provides for all their needs. But more than that, He wants His sheep to have life to the full! By caring for all of our needs, His flock understands that they have nothing to fear of the future. Our Shepherd makes sure that He leads us exactly where we have our needs met and can rest assured that He will protect us, as the gate, from those who wish to destroy us.

Did you notice that the Good Shepherd leads His sheep? He calls each one out of the fold by name and leads them to their pasture. The Pharisees wanted to call directions from behind the flock. They would teach and debate God's Word. But then, they watched from the periphery of the flock for mistakes to correct.

They tried to correct Jesus when He instructed that He was the Son of God. They tried to excommunicate the healed-blind man because he asked questions rather than doing as they instructed. They sought to kill Jesus because He didn't fit into the mold, they expected Him to exhibit as Messiah. They sought to "kill and to destroy" because they wanted to control all the lives of their sheep.

Jesus, on the other hand, came to be a giving shepherd that cares deeply for His sheep. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own 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]

All of us have seen or heard of leaders who care nothing for their followers. They present themselves as knowledgeable and experienced, worthy of a following. Through their charisma, they may build up a huge following and construct marvelous buildings or organizations for their cause. But we have also seen their fall. When allegations are proven, when the books are examined, when innuendo reveals evidence, the person is proven to be only a "hireling;" they run away and leave the flock to pick up the pieces.

That is not the pattern our Good Shepherd has established for a leader to follow. Jesus came to seek and to save those who were lost. Even when we get lost and follow someone who is preaching "another gospel," Jesus is ready to seek us out. He will lift us up, close to His heart and heal our wounds. He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. That is why He was willing to lay down His life for His sheep.

In verse 17 He states, "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 10:17,18]

No matter how good or dedicated a "hireling" was, they were not as invested in the lives of the flock as the owner. Now, consider Jesus, our Good Shepherd. He planned to have believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, in His flock from the beginning of time. He planned ahead for us. He planned to have on hand everything we needed for a full and happy life. He rescued

us from “hirelings” and set us safely in His fold. Then, He stood in the gap of the gate and fended off all of the robbers, thieves, wolves, and uncaring hirelings that would do us harm.

But He knew from the beginning that we are quite aptly called, “dumb sheep.” We stubbornly insist on going our own way. We easily turn to the wide, worldly way and end up feeding on weeds and thorns of no nutritional value to our souls.

So, He planned to make a way that we could come back to the fold. He was willing to lay down His life on the cross to pay for our selfish sins so that we could repent and be forgiven and restored to the Father’s flock. Even though Jesus knew that the Pharisees were at that time planning on killing Him, His life would never be taken by them. He would only give His life of His own accord. (v.17)

We can see that clearly, in this study of the book of John. Several times already we have read that the leaders wanted to kill Jesus. But He just walked away. The timing of Jesus’ death was in the Father’s hands. No one had any power to take His life. Only Jesus had the authority to lay down His life for His sheep. The Father had commanded it to be that way. And so, it was.

Let’s let our attention go back to verse 16 before we go on from here. It says, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” [John 10:16] Jesus was talking about you and me.

Jesus the Good Shepherd knew He was the best shepherd for all His sheep. He cared with His life for each and every one of them. But the fact that Jesus laid down His life on the cross for our sins was not exclusively for Jews. His sacrifice would be for the whole world. He died for us all. He would die for the Pharisees too! He wanted all to come to follow Him and find that abundant life He offered.

Phillip Keller wrote a book called, “A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23.” As a shepherd himself, he knew how important a good shepherd was to the sheep he tended. He remarked about a tenant sheepman who worked on the farm next to his. This man seemed indifferent to the condition of his sheep. Pastor Keller wrote, “Every year these poor creatures were forced to gnaw away at bare brown fields and impoverished pastures. Every winter there was a shortage of nourishing hay and wholesome grain to feed the hungry ewes. Shelter to safeguard and protect the suffering sheep from storms and blizzards was scanty and inadequate.

“They had only polluted, muddy water to drink. There had been a lack of salt and other trace minerals needed to offset their sickly pastures. In their thin, weak and diseased condition these poor sheep were a pathetic sight. In my mind’s eye I can still see them standing at the fence, huddled sadly in little knots, staring wistfully through the wires at the rich pastures on the other side.” [A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23; by Phillip Keller; 1970; Zondervan]

Having read that section of Mr. Keller’s book, I understand how the Lord viewed the “other sheep not of this sheep pen.” We were poor, pathetic, starving and destined to die that way. But our Good Shepherd saw us in that condition. He loved each one of us and didn’t want

to leave us in such a despicable state. So, He chose to die for all of the world. His compassion moved Him to lay down His life for us sheep. And I am so glad He did.

The Pharisees heard the entire description of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. But they were divided about what to think of Him. “The Jews who heard these words 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]

This great discussion between the religious leaders and Jesus took place during the Feast of Tabernacles, which was a week-long celebration held during the fall, in our months of September or October. The next discussion we will examine took place during the Festival of Dedication or the Festival of Lights occurring during the winter, or in our month of December. This was commemorating the dedication of the Temple in 165 BC, by Judas Maccabeus, after it had been defiled by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, in the time between the records of our Old Testament and New Testament books of the Bible.

The challenges next thrown at Jesus reveal that for the last two months, the Jewish leaders had been mulling over all Jesus had said and done during the previous Feast of Tabernacles. As Jesus walked along the colonnade in the Temple courtyard, the Jews approached him saying, “...How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” [John 10:24]

Jesus had explained that He was the Good Shepherd of Israel. He, unlike robbers, thieves and hirelings truly cared for His people. While the hirelings would abandon the people when danger approached, He as the Good Shepherd would give His life for the people. In fact, His willingness to lay down His life for the sheep proved His authority as the Good Shepherd. His future crucifixion would be His opportunity to obey the Father’s command.

However, since the religious leaders asked again about Jesus being Messiah, it showed that they still refused to believe Jesus was the One, Whom God had sent. What further proof did they need? So, Jesus answered them by saying: “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify about 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.” [John 10:25-27]

Jesus reminded them of His analogy of the sheep and shepherd. And He challenged them to just believe Him. His words and works were proof that He was the Messiah. He was sent by God the Father to gather those who would believe in Him. But because He didn’t fit into the pattern, they expected Messiah to be, they would not believe. These leaders only sought to have a clear declaration from Jesus by which they could charge Him and execute Him. They would not be swayed to join His flock of believing sheep.

Because they would not believe, they desired to eliminate Jesus and, hopefully, this mass of believers who followed Him. But Jesus recognized their motives and challenged their purpose. They would not scatter His flock. “I give them [my sheep] eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will 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 10:28-30]

This declaration is one of the most potent pictures of our security in Christ that the Scriptures offer. Picture, if you will, all of Jesus' followers as one little lamb. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, holds that lamb in the palm of His hand. We are safely guarded by our Good Shepherd. But then, picture the Father's hand coming across our vision to cup over the Son's hand, hiding all believers in the shelter of this Divine grip.

We can call out, like Paul did “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?” “Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” [Romans 8:35,39] Our hearts shout “Amen!” to that!

But the religious rulers did not. “Again, his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said, to them, ‘I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?’” [John 10:31,32]

“‘We are not stoning you for any good work,’ they replied, ‘but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.’” [John 10:33] Jesus had said, “I and the Father are one.” (v.30) The narrow mindedness of the religious leaders would not allow them to rationally examine Jesus' good works. If they had, they would realize that no mere man could do the works Jesus did, and they would have believed in Him.

They wouldn't rationally examine any proof because they already had already decided He had to be eliminated. But while they searched the ground for good sized stones, Jesus challenged them, again, to think. “Jesus answered them, ‘Is it not written in your Law, “I have said you are ‘gods’? If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came – and Scripture cannot be set aside – what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, “I am God's Son?” [John 10:34-36]

Jesus was reminding these religious rulers that they had studied with determination the Scriptures as they took up their occupation. In Exodus 4:16 God described the part Aaron would play as Moses' interpreter before Pharaoh. “He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him.” Then, in Exodus 7:1, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet.’” Later, speaking about how Israel's judges would serve as God's dispensers of justice, Psalm 82:6 stated: “I said, ‘You are “gods”; you are all sons of the Most High.’”

The prophets and judges of Israel were God's representatives. As they dispensed justice, they were to follow God's law, and so were to be speaking for God. The honest judges were to be considered “gods” as they spoke God's judgments. Jesus as Messiah, put Himself in such a place of responsibility before the people. He should be held in respect as God's mouthpiece as He spoke God the Father's words and obeyed the Father's commands.

Barnes, in his commentary, summed up the result of Jesus' argument. "1. That Jesus did not deny that he meant to apply the term [Messiah] to himself. 2. He did not deny that it was properly applied to him. 3. He did not deny that it implied that he was God. He affirmed only that they were inconsistent and were not authorized to bring a charge of blasphemy for the application of the name to himself." [Barnes commentary; on John 10:36]

Jesus went on to say in verses 37 and 38, "Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." [John 10:37,38] Therefore, as Jesus continued to do the works of the Father, He could not be held as committing blasphemy because He walked in obedience in everything He did.

However, the religious rulers would not believe or listen to Jesus' arguments. "Again, they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp." [John 10:39] Jesus left Jerusalem and traveled across the Jordan River. He and His disciples camped at the place where John had baptized many people earlier. Verse 41 and 42 said, "and many people came to him. They said, 'Though John never performed a sign, all that John said about this man was true.' And in that place, many believed in Jesus."

Jesus did not run away from the religious rulers. He was not hiding. Many followed Him and came to hear Him as He camped across the Jordan. Unlike the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes, these crowds listened to His teachings and compared what He taught to what they had heard John teach, and they believed. (v.41,42) These new believers became part of the flock of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

What, then, can we learn from Jesus' teaching about the Good Shepherd?

1. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because He knows His sheep and His sheep know Him. Jesus knows us by name. He has chosen each and every one of His sheep and is involved in our lives. He knows our habits and lovingly trains us to follow Him instead of going our own way. We can never go wrong by following the voice of our Good Shepherd.
2. Jesus is our Good Shepherd and the gate or door of our sheepfold. Jesus has personally placed Himself between us and our enemies. He keeps us safe from robbers and thieves. He has given His life to keep us safe. By "taking it up again", Jesus rose from the grave to enable us to live forever with Him through His resurrection power.
3. Because Jesus is our Good Shepherd, we live securely in His hand. We are safe and immovable there, because the Father also holds us in His hand to protect us too! Our destiny is secure because the Almighty God holds us in His hand.

Therefore, as David said at the end of His Psalm 23, "Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." For this security, let us be truly Thankful!