



# THE GOOD SHEPHERD

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 10:1-21

Twenty-first Message

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A number of years ago I came across a paraphrase of the Scriptures entitled *Epistles Now*, by Leslie Brandt. I will read a brief excerpt from 2 Corinthians 11 to introduce our theme from the tenth chapter of the gospel of John this morning:

There are times when it is necessary to consider amongst the scores of self-appointed preachers and prophets about us, who really speaks for God and who is merely padding his ego or filling his own pockets. Many of the sermons that saturate our airwaves, or the books that make best-selling lists, are, in spite of pious references to the Almighty, vain attempts at self-aggrandizement and do very little for the Kingdom of God. We must learn how to separate the wheat from the chaff, the truth from a myriad of half-truths, lest we be led astray by articulate speech or pulpit personality or the innumerable gimmicks designed to attract the bewildered masses. Unfortunately, we are often more impressed by statistics than we are by the quality of that which is foisted upon the public. Whereas we must be careful in our judgments of God's servants, we need keen minds and sharp wits to determine who they are who really are serving the Lord and to whom we may listen with confidence and trust. We may all be suspected and accused of having ulterior motives in our pursuit of converts. But there are some who are genuine while others are not. We have no acid test that will immediately separate the authentic from the less than authentic. But we can ask certain questions that may resolve in strengthening or destroying our confidence in these people.

Who speaks for God? This is the question at issue in the tenth chapter of the gospel of John. As we have already seen, the blind beggar who had been healed had to face this very question. Was Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, or was he a sinner, as the Pharisees charged?

Jesus makes extensive use of the imagery of a shepherd and sheep in this passage. The familiar verses of the 23rd Psalm immediately come to mind. Throughout the ages, Christians facing pressure and danger have drawn strength and comfort from the words of this marvelous psalm. The Lord is indeed our Shepherd. He makes us to lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside still waters. He guides us in paths of righteousness. He restores our soul.

These images of a shepherd and his sheep are found throughout the Scriptures, in fact. The psalmist wrote, "We are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3). Isaiah declared, "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" (Isa. 40:11). Before his crucifixion, Jesus referred to Isaiah's prophecy of the Suffering Servant, and said, "You will all fall away, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'" (Mark 14:27). The author of

Hebrews referred to Jesus as "...that great Shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. 13:20). Peter saw him as the "Chief Shepherd" to whom the under-shepherds (leaders in the church) are responsible (1 Peter 5:4).

I am deeply humbled when I read in the gospels that "Jesus had compassion on the multitude because they were like a sheep without a shepherd." I imagine how different these sentiments would sound if they were referring to me. It might read, "They were like a sheep without a shepherd, so Gary told them to quit grazing on his pasture and to head back to their pens!"

"Jesus had compassion..." In the original, the word is *splanchnizomai*. Unless you are in the medical profession this word probably will not mean much to you. "Splanchnology" is the study of the visceral parts, a study of the gut, to put it in modern idiom. "Jesus had compassion..." This is not speaking of casual pity for people. The term is far more graphic. Jesus was moved in the deepest part of his emotions. He felt hurt in his gut for people. He felt the pain of the nobleman whose son was near death; the embarrassment and hurt of the woman at the well; the shame of the woman who had been caught in adultery; the hurt of the paralytic man at the pool of Bethesda; the helplessness of the beggar who had been blind all his life. So moved was he in his stomach by those needs that he couldn't help but heal their hurts. Jesus was indeed the Good Shepherd, as he claimed to be here in this chapter. He regarded the Pharisees, the experts who had twisted the teachings of the law, as false shepherds, thieves and robbers.

However, in order to recognize Jesus as the Good Shepherd we must first admit that we are sheep. This is not a particularly complimentary comparison, but it is accurate. Sheep are dumb and dirty; they are timid and defenseless. Our feelings are hurt when we are called sheep, aren't they? But if we are honest, we know it is true. We lack wisdom and strength. We are inclined to be self-destructive. We are prone to wander. Isaiah said it best: "We are all like sheep who have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way." To the ancient mind, there was no clearer picture of lostness than a sheep without a shepherd. This was why Jesus had compassion on the multitudes and felt moved to help.

As we come to our text, let us try to imagine ourselves as sheep. If we do so, we will discover how wonderful life truly can be in the fold of God. John 10:

**"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. When he puts forth all his own, he goes before them,**

and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. And a stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers."

These details, which are foreign to us, would be quite familiar to John's readers. In the East, shepherds brought their flocks into an enclosure, called a sheepfold, every evening. Half-a-dozen or more flocks would gather together, and an under-shepherd (a watchman or gatekeeper) would guard the gate. In the morning, the shepherds returned and each called his own sheep. Although the flocks would have mingled together, each one knew its own shepherd's voice and each would follow him and no other. Those whose interest was in stealing or harming the sheep (thieves and robbers) would avoid the gate.

The Pharisees of our Lord's day considered themselves to be the leaders of God's people. It is obvious, however, that it is these men whom Jesus calls false shepherds, thieves and robbers. They had no compassion for the lame man of chapter 5. He had been sick for 38 years, but they would rather see him sit in his wretchedness by the pool of Bethesda than have their traditions broken. They criticized and judged the woman caught in adultery. They didn't have any interest in the man born blind. They didn't see their role as shepherds caring for the sheep.

These verses take us back to Ezekiel 34, where the Lord berated the shepherds of Israel for slaughtering the choice animals, clothing themselves with the wool, and failing to look after the sheep. Ezekiel 34:4:

**"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.**

God insisted they were *his* sheep, *his* flock. So he went on to say what he would do. Verse 10:

**"I will rescue my flock from their mouths . . . I myself will search for my sheep and look after them . . . 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 . . . I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel . . . I myself will tend my sheep . . . I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak . . . I will shepherd the flock with justice.**

God continued (verse 23):

**"I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. "I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety."**

Here in chapter 10 of John, Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of all the hopes of Israel. It is a claim to Deity. He alone embodied the shepherd-care of God, he said. His claim was every bit as devastating and divisive as his claim to be the light of the world. Here was the embodiment of the true Shepherd who brought God's own shepherding role to bear.

In the Ancient Near East, the voice of the shepherd was vitally important to the sheep; they would recognize it. Shepherding was an intimate, highly personal occupation in that area. Unlike in the West, where the sheep are herded

by a sheep dog, the Palestinian shepherd would go before the sheep to lead them. So a shepherd knew his sheep and would call them by name. This is what Jesus did as John recorded throughout this book: he called individuals by name, they heard his voice and followed. The blind man, for instance, immediately recognized the difference between the true Shepherd of Israel and the stranger's voice of the religious leaders.

The analogy seems straightforward from a natural point of view, yet we find a curious thing in verse 6:

**This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them.**

They didn't understand the spiritual thrust of the allegory. Perhaps they couldn't comprehend its spiritual reality because they had never seen this kind of shepherding at the human level.

This was why Jesus went on to expand the analogy. He applied the story to himself to help them understand, building his explanation around two more "I am" statements: "I am the door" (7-10), and "I am the good shepherd" (11-18):

**Jesus therefore said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy; I came that they might have life, and might have [it] abundantly.**

Here, Jesus changes the figure slightly. He does not refer to himself as the Shepherd, but the "door of the sheep." Perhaps this picture comes from the middle of the work day of an Eastern shepherd. In the early afternoon he would provide a temporary shelter built of shrubs, where the sheep could rest, following the morning grazing. This was a coral-type structure where the sheep could lie, protected from wild animals. It had an opening across which the shepherd himself lay so that the sheep could not go in or out without crossing over him. This is what Jesus had in mind when he said, "I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."

In this beautiful figure we learn that life in the fold of God provides salvation, security and nourishment. The Pharisees, those whom Jesus called thieves and robbers, had stolen the truth. They wanted to rob the man born blind of the true meaning of the Sabbath, the true meaning of the law (chapter 9). But he paid no heed to them. On the contrary, he marveled at their blindness. "What an amazing thing," he said. "You don't know who this man is, but he opened my eyes. Never before in the history of the world has a miracle like this happened and you don't seem to know who this is!" This is what Jesus promises: His true sheep will be given understanding and will not follow error.

"In order to go into the fold," said Jesus, "you must go through me. To go out to pasture you must go through me." He is both the protector and the provider for the flock. His promise to his sheep is that they will "find pasture." This is a picture of nourishment. Have you discovered this "pasture"? Oftentimes, life does not seem like a pasture, does it? It looks more like a wilderness. We are surrounded, not by green grass and still waters, but by stones and rocks.

We are not full, but hungry and tired. But, surprisingly, it is only in a wilderness that we will taste of the supernatural provision of God.

This was true in David's life. He was in a wilderness, not in a green pasture, when he wrote Psalm 23. Once the prophet Samuel had whispered in his ear, "You will be the next king." But David did not ascend to the throne of Israel. Instead he had to flee to the wilderness, pursued by a mad king. Fifty lament psalms tell his story as he poured out his heart to God. But there, in the wilderness, David discovered that God could turn a wilderness into a green pasture.

Only in a wilderness can the supernatural food of God be tasted. This was what the nation of Israel discovered following their release from bondage in Egypt. They walked on dry land through the Red Sea, not to the Promised Land, but to the wilderness. There they learned that "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

Jesus, too, had his wilderness experience. At his baptism, the heavens opened and God declared, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." But Jesus did not ascend the throne to reign over his people, did he? The Spirit led him to a wilderness where he fasted for forty days and nights. Afterwards, the angels came and fed him with supernatural food.

Why should it be any different with us? God is preparing us to reign, and our place of preparation is a wilderness. In order that we might receive his supernatural food, he must take away our normal sources of nourishment, all the things we rely on for strength and food. Are you hungry this morning? Are you thirsty? Don't despair. Allow Jesus to feed you with his supernatural food. That is what he promised when he said he came to give us abundant life.

Larry Crabb wrote this of the true nature of the abundant life:

Christianity was never intended to be one laugh after another. The abundant life which Christians walk down several aisles to find is not the comfortable, problem-free existence most are hoping to receive. It is a life of warfare, a struggle for God against Satan, a life full of disappointments, heartaches, and suffering. So what is abundant about it? Simply this: the knowledge that we belong to the God of reality, that we are living a meaningful life under the guidance and control of a caring Savior who one day will bring us into eternal rest.

This is what makes life rich and meaningful.

What strange creatures we are! We spend the best part of our lives making money and seeking success, only to find at the end that we have wasted our lives. All the good things — joy and peace, the things that make for a sense of accomplishment — slip by and we miss them. We end up with what has been called "Destination Sickness." That is the place where we arrive only to find that we finally have everything we ever wanted, but we don't want anything we have. Jesus wants to free us from this.

Jim Valvano, the former basketball coach at North Carolina State University, died of cancer last week. A few days ago as I was driving in my car, I heard a speech given by him last November at a banquet in his honor to raise money for cancer research. He knew he was dying (he had over a thousand tumors in his body), and in a brief, emotional address he exhorted his audience to care about the things that

really matter in life. Spend some time each day laughing, crying, and reflecting, he said.

As I listened, it struck me that was what Jesus was promising here in John 10. He said, in effect, "If you enter this door, you will be saved from a wasted life. You will have great freedom and security." These are insecure times for some of you. You feel insecure in your jobs. Rapid change keeps hitting you all the time. But if you know this Shepherd you will have a sense of security, because you have a relationship with the One who is in charge of all of life. Jesus said to his disciples, "All power in heaven and on earth is given to me. I send you out into the world as sheep in the midst of wolves." Does this describe where you work? Do you labor among wolves who are ready to snap at you, chew you up and spit you out? Jesus promises to go with you in and out of any dimension of life.

If you know this Shepherd, you are assured of direction. We all want to know that we are in the Father's will, that what we are doing with our lives has meaning and purpose. We don't like feeling restless and unsettled. Maybe you are a student and you are wondering what to major in; or you have just graduated and you are unsure of where to go from here. Maybe you are a parent and you are unsure of how to deal with your son or daughter. The Good Shepherd knows your concerns. He promises to lead you, not to drive you, to go before you, to show you what to do. Our task is to keep listening to his voice, to follow him. His desire is that we may have life and have it abundantly, not just surviving, barely making it from day to day, but living a life filled with joy and love and peace.

In verse 11, Jesus reverts back to the figure of a shepherd:

**"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hireling, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters {them.} {He flees} because he is a hireling, and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.**

The primary characteristic of the Good Shepherd is that he loves unto death. Four different times we are told that Christ laid down his life for the sheep. The disciples never got over the fact that Jesus loved them so much he was willing to die for them.

It is no mistake that people are referred to as sheep. Left to ourselves, we make a mess of our lives. We need someone to look after us, someone who is concerned about our welfare and safety. In Jesus we have a Shepherd who will do what Israel's shepherds were unwilling to do: he loves sacrificially; he binds up the injured; he strengthens the weak. Jesus had compassion on the afflicted and the handicapped, on those wounded by their own sin. He encouraged those who were weak and likely to stray.

What a contrast with the hireling! All the other religious voices want something for themselves. They want to exploit the sheep, to use them to advance and build themselves up. When the sheep get into trouble, when the wolf (the devil) comes, the hireling flees, leaving the sheep to fend for themselves. What a sad confirmation of this truth was the terrible climax to the Branch Davidians cult in Waco, Texas. Da-

vid Koresh was looked up to and trusted as a leader, but he led his flock into murder, suicide and destruction.

And Jesus says that his purpose in laying down his life for us is that he might share his life with us. Notice how he puts it: "I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father." Later in this gospel, he said, "Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for a slave does not know what his master is doing. But everything the Father has told me, I have told you."

My father died when I was 11 months old. As I was growing up, I longed to have a father. I was envious of my friends who had their fathers around all the time. I would even do my homework at a friend's house just to be around his dad. That is why I am so sensitive, even today, to a father and son spending time together and sharing their love with each other. I am grateful that God has given me three precious sons whom I love very much.

This is one of the things that drew me to this book — discovering that there is a heavenly Father who knows me and still loves me, a Father who wants to be intimate with me. And this is what Jesus is referring to here: the intimacy of fellowship and the relationship which he shares with his heavenly Father is available to us.

Life in God's fold provides intimacy. We all want to love and to be loved, to be understood, to know that someone really cares for us, to know that we matter. Many of us marry for these reasons only to discover that as wonderful as marriage can be, it cannot ultimately meet our deep need to be loved. We have an idealized picture of the spouse we are looking for, but there aren't any people like that. Maybe you are a single woman here this morning and you are waiting for Mr. Right to meet your deep need to be loved. But there are no princes who will come along and make your world right; there are only frogs. If you are looking for a man and you haven't found him yet, Jesus is seeking you. He is sitting on the rim of your well, waiting for you. He has been looking for you all your life. The Good Shepherd knows you and loves you. He is not put off by your weaknesses. He is the very one who left the 99 sheep to seek out the one who had strayed away. Your idiosyncrasies don't matter to him. Your past is no threat to him. He wants to bring you back into the fold, back to pasture among his own.

Jesus closes with these words

**"And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock {with} one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down**

**My life that I may take it up again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."**

There arose a division again among the Jews because of these words. And many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?" Others were saying, "These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?"

These verses remind us of the wonderful benediction at the end of the letter to the Hebrews: "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." Here Jesus is the Great Shepherd. The first thing he says concerning his work as the Great Shepherd is that he has "other sheep that are not of this fold." The fold he was referring to was the nation of Israel. Jesus was lifting his eyes beyond the cross, beyond the resurrection, to the going forth of the gospel to all the nations of the earth. Isn't it moving to think that not one of us would be here this morning as Gentile believers in Jesus if he had not been willing to lay down his life for the sheep? The result of that laying down of his life was that the gospel broke out beyond the boundaries of Israel and spread throughout the earth. Here we are, at the far corners of the world, meeting as a great crowd of believers in Jesus, because he laid down his life for the sheep.

He brought us together so that there is "one flock." Not one fold, notice, but "one flock" and "one shepherd." No more than one: one church, one Lord, as Paul put it in Ephesians 4. We all belong together. There are not two flocks; there is only one.

That came about because of the fact that he obeyed the Father's charge. He laid down his life. He had the power to do it. Do not let anybody tell you that Jesus was hounded to death or that he was crucified against his will. He chose to die. He could have prevented it; he could have resisted it. This is the meaning of the bloody sweat in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he said, "If it be possible, Father, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." Thus he obeyed the Father to the end. He gave himself up and took his life again that he might share it with us. He is indeed the Good Shepherd. I commend you to his care.

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