

Message #40

Kurt Hedlund

John

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FOLLOWING THE GOOD SHEPHERD (Part 2)

JOHN 10:11-21

INTRO

Gevas (PROJECTOR ON--- GEVAS MAP) is a small town in the province in eastern Turkey shown here in red. Sheep ranching is a mainstay of the economy in this region. A few years ago sheep from 26 families were grazing together on a hillside. There were about 1500 of them. Suddenly one sheep decided to run in a particular direction. The whole flock decided to follow that sheep. It was not a particularly wise decision. For the one sheep headed for a cliff and went off over the side. The rest of the flock followed and went over the fifty foot drop.

(GEVAS SHEEP) The saving grace was that so many sheep took the leap that the ones in back fell onto the woolly mound below and were not injured. But 450 sheep died. That was a significant loss for that small community. It cost the shepherds well over \$100,000.

Such is the evidence that sheep are not especially intelligent creatures. (PROJECTOR OFF) They need guidance and protection. They need good shepherds. It is also not especially complimentary that God's people in the Bible are frequently compared to sheep. Their leaders are often called shepherds.

This terminology is not unique to the Bible. Throughout the Ancient Near East people and their rulers and their gods were described in terms of sheep and shepherds. In Egypt a shepherd's crook was often used as a symbol of kingship. Some of you may remember that Hammurabi was the king associated with the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. He referred to himself as a shepherd of his people. More of you may remember Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king who destroyed Jerusalem and led many of the people of Judah into captivity. He is frequently mentioned in the Old Testament book of Daniel. In one inscription discovered by archaeologists he says this (PROJECTOR ON--- NEBUCHADNEZZAR INSCRIPTION) about himself: **"I, Nebuchadnezzar, the righteous king, faithful shepherd who leads the peoples, director of the regions belonging to Bel, Samas, and Marduk..."**

So the Bible and Jesus did not invent the metaphorical languages of sheep and shepherds, but they did give the terminology a new meaning. That usage and its application have important lessons for us in understanding our relationship to God. We are going to look at those lessons this morning. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In our ongoing study of John's Gospel we have seen that tension has been rising between Jesus and the religious leaders. The setting for the conflict in Chapters 7-10 has been the celebration of the eight day Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. In Hebrew it is known as Sukkot. Ironically, today is the last day of Sukkot in the Jewish calendar.

Jesus has added to the tensions by declaring Himself to be the light of the world and then, on the Sabbath, healing a man born blind. The religious leaders could not appreciate the wonderful miracle that Jesus had performed because He had violated their interpretation of the Sabbath commandment. Jesus just did not meet their expectations of what the Messiah should be like. So they interviewed this man formerly blind and his parents, trying to find some reason to criticize the man and his healer. In frustration they kicked the man previously blind out of the synagogue.

Last week in vv. 1-10 of #10 we looked at the conversation that followed, which included the Pharisees, the dominant group among the rabbis. In vv. 1-6 Jesus described Himself as a shepherd. In vv. 7-10 He described Himself as a door to the sheepfold. He claimed that he was the way to be part of God's flock. Today the discussion continues in vv. 11-21. We find four characteristics about Jesus that relate to His title of "the Good Shepherd."

I.

In vv. 11-15, we find that THE GOOD SHEPHERD IS RECOGNIZED BY HIS SACRIFICIAL LOVE. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE GOOD SHEPHERD IS RECOGNIZED...) In v. 11, which is found on p. 896 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs, Jesus says, **"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."**

The Apostle John has organized his biographical material about Jesus around seven sign miracles that Jesus performed. The sixth one was the healing of this man born blind. John also includes seven "I am" statements that Jesus makes about Himself. The Greek words for "I am" are associated with the name for God in the Old Testament, which is YHWH. So far in John's Gospel we have seen Jesus make three "I

am” statements. In #6 He declared, “I am the bread of life.” In #8 He declared, “I am the light of the world.” Last week in the beginning of #10 He declared, “I am the door.” Now he declares, “I am the good shepherd.”

The Greek article for “the” is used in the description of this good shepherd. Jesus is not claiming to be one among many good shepherds. He is claiming a certain uniqueness for His role.

There is one other common word for “good” in the New Testament. The word in our text is a general word that is used of someone or something that is noble or worthy. The basic image that we have is that the good shepherd provides for and guides and protects his sheep. He puts his life on the line for them.

In ancient times wolves and lions and bears were threats to sheep, along with robbers and thieves. Occasionally shepherds would die in defending their sheep, although this was rarely the case. In the Old Testament we are told that David took on bears and lions which threatened his flock.

In all of these cases it was not the intent of the shepherd to die for his sheep. This good shepherd intentionally lays down His life for His sheep. The original word for “for” in this verse is used in John’s Gospel in sacrificial contexts. The idea is that His sacrifice is offered in behalf of the sheep, or perhaps in place of the sheep.

It is a similar use of this preposition that appears in Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:21) In #5 v. 21 he writes, “**He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf --- same Greek word--- for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.**” Somehow the death of Jesus Christ makes it possible that we might be proclaimed righteous.

Normally the death of a shepherd would mean disaster, if there was no other shepherd watching the sheep. The sheep would be left helpless. But here it is implied that there is something good about the sacrifice of this good shepherd. This is an act of sacrificial love. The Apostle Paul explains in 2 Corinthians that this sacrifice is for sin. The implication is that the sheep are in grave danger. The sacrifice of the shepherd accomplishes something good for his sheep.

There is an explanation for this in the Old Testament, in the prophet Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah in #53 speaks of the Messiah, the Good Shepherd, laying down His life like a sheep. (ISAIAH 53:7) Beginning in

v. 7 he writes, **“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. (ISAIAH 53:8) By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?”**

The New Testament explains that it was Jesus who fulfilled this prophecy. As God and man, He died in our place to pay the penalty for our sin. When we trust in Jesus, this payment for sin becomes ours. Our sin is forgiven, and we receive the gift of eternal life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Back in v. 12 of our text, Jesus says, **“He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.”** Larger flocks in the Ancient Near East had shepherds who were hired to help the owners of the flocks. They naturally did not have the same commitment to the sheep as did the owner. They were working for wages. It was understandable that they would not risk their lives for sheep that they did not own.

In the Mishnah, a set of ancient Jewish writings, there is a discussion about the obligation of a hired hand to a flock of sheep. The conclusion there is that a good hired hand should defend the flock if it is attacked by one wolf. If there are two or more wolves, a hired man was not to be blamed for any loss of sheep. (*Bara Metzia 7:8-9*)

Since Jesus is speaking in metaphorical language, we might naturally wonder who the hired hand is intended to represent. Probably it is the Pharisees and other religious leaders who are in view. We have seen that they have been largely motivated to be in their positions for selfish reasons. They have limited care for the sheep. When the blind man among their flock is healed, their concern is only for the perceived violation of their interpretation of the Sabbath commandment by the healer.

The further problem with hired hands is that they are more likely to flee when a wolf attacks. Jesus adds in v. 13, **“He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.”** Who, or what, is the actual threat represented by wolves? Jesus in Matthew 7 v. 15 (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 7:15) said, **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”** Wolves might also include false messiahs. They might include anyone trying to do in the sheep

As a pastor, I have spent a fair amount of time in nursing homes and hospitals and hospices over the years. I have seen some workers in these places who act like hired hands. They seem to be doing a job and have limited care for the patients they serve. But then I have seen others who truly act like shepherds, who seem to go out of their way to care for the men and women in their charge. Those are the kind of people that we want for ourselves and for our loved ones. That is what a good shepherd is like. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus continues in vv. 14 & 15, **“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”** This is a restatement of Jesus’ earlier claim to be the good shepherd, but there is an added twist involving an additional comparison. The relationship of the sheep to Jesus bears some comparison to the relationship of Jesus to the Father.

The original word for “know” here in John’s Gospel means more than just a knowledge of facts. It implies a certain intimacy. Certainly the extent of knowledge between the Father and the Son is not the same as the knowledge of the sheep toward the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep intimately. But the sheep are limited in their knowledge of their shepherd. But the true sheep do have a certain knowledge of the Good Shepherd. They have a commitment to the same values. They have a unity of purpose. They have a mutual love for the other sheep.

Notice also a central purpose of the sacrificial love of the Good Shepherd. He lays down His life for His sheep, for His chosen ones.

After the death and departure of the Good Shepherd, He would appoint human shepherds to lead His flock. In 1 Peter #5 vv. 1 & 2 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 PETER 5:1-2A), the Apostle Peter would write, **“So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you...”**

In recent months the church in China has been facing a renewed persecution from the Communist government. In February, new rules were implemented that included orders for churches to burn their crosses and to replace them with Chinese flags and to display slogans praising the Communist Party. Some churches have been forced to join the government-sanctioned churches and to allow video surveillance of their services.

Recently 250 pastors publicly signed a statement opposing the new regulations. Their statement included these words: **“We declare that in matters of external conduct, churches are willing to accept lawful oversight by civil administration or other government departments as other social organizations do. But under no circumstances will we lead our churches to join a religious organization controlled by the government, to register with the religious administration department, or to accept and kind of affiliation.”** Their statement concluded with this: **“For the sake of the gospel, we are prepared to bear all losses--- even the loss of our freedom and our lives.”**

Do those pastors sound like hired men, or true shepherds? Does it not sound like they are willing to lay down their lives for their sheep? The point of this part of the passage is to recognize the one true Shepherd by His sacrificial love. But His undershepherds, His leaders of the local church, should also be recognized and characterized by a sacrificial love.

II.

In v. 16 we find that THE GOOD SHEPHERD SEEKS DIVERSITY IN HIS FLOCK. (II. THE GOOD SHEPHERD SEEKS...) **“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”** We saw last week from the first few verses of this chapter that the fold to which Jesus referred appears to be Judaism. I quoted the earlier statement of Jesus that He came initially to reach the lost sheep of Israel. He came with a purpose that was ultimately larger than that.

We saw in #3 that Jesus told Nicodemus that God so loved the world that He gave His unique Son. In the next chapter we saw a hint of this broader purpose when Jesus sought out the Samaritan woman at the well. Now in this verse Jesus specifically indicates that he is seeking sheep beyond Israel. He is seeking Gentiles.

Notice also that Jesus speaks of already having these sheep. He does not say that He will have them. They are not yet part of His fold. Yet somehow He calls them His sheep. How can this be? It can be because God the Father has chosen them. They are part of His elect.

In #6 v. 37 (JOHN 6:37) Jesus said, **“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”** These sheep not of the fold of Judaism have been chosen to be part of the flock of Jesus. They are not yet brought in, but Jesus is certain to bring them in. They will ultimately respond to His call.

The result will be one flock and one Shepherd. There will be no separate Jewish church and Gentile church. There is a cultural and religious barrier to be overcome. But the Holy Spirit will help these sheep to overcome that.

So it is that Jesus will later command His disciples to extend their vision to bring in Christ's sheep from all over the world. In what is known as the Great Commission, recorded in Matthew #28 v. 19 (MATTHEW 28:19), Jesus will say, **"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."** God has chosen sheep in other parts of the world to be part of His flock. Our responsibility as Jesus followers is to speak in His behalf. We are to seek them out.

Our other responsibility is to promote diversity in His flock. It is clear that Jesus wants all kinds of people in His church. That is a testimony to the power of the gospel to bring different kinds of people together. We can rejoice that we have different kinds of people in our congregation. Even though we live in a fairly white, middle class community, we have a good representation of ethnic backgrounds in our midst. We have people with prison backgrounds. We have people with roots from different parts of the country. We have kids from the inner city. We would like to have more young families, and we will keep working on that.

III.

Then in vv. 17 & 18 we find that THE GOOD SHEPHERD DISPLAYS DIVINITY. (III. THE GOOD SHEPHERD DISPLAYS DIVINITY.) In v. 17 Jesus says, **"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again."**

Is Jesus saying that the Father's love is dependent upon Jesus' self-sacrifice? No. The Father and the Son had a perfect relationship from eternity past. At the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of His ministry (MATTHEW 17:5), Matthew says, **"He [Jesus] was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.'"** The Father was clearly loving the Son before His crucifixion.

When my wife does something special for me, I love her for that. But that does not mean that I did not love her before. It is the same in this situation. That Jesus lays down His life is just one of many reasons that the Father loves the Son. (PROJECTOR OFF) In a similar way, Jesus loves us unconditionally. But

when we are obedient to Him, especially in situations of testing, He has a special love for us, and our relationship with Him is deepened.

Notice also that one of the purposes of Jesus' death is the resurrection. The result of that is His glorification and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. His death was the result of a divine plan that included His rising from the dead.

Jesus has power in Himself to rise from the dead. Any martyr can lay down his life. But only the Son of God has power to raise Himself from the dead. The Good Shepherd displays His divinity in His death and resurrection.

In v. 18 He adds, **"No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."** As this story unfolds, it is clear that the religious leaders are conspiring to kill Jesus. But He is not a victim of circumstances beyond His control. All of this is part of a divine plan.

In Acts #4 persecution of the first Christians is beginning to happen in Jerusalem. (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 4:27) But these early Christians pray in v. 27, **"...for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, (ACTS 4:28) to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."**

So the Father and the Son are united in this plan. Jesus is doing the will of His Father, but the Son is in full agreement with this plan. (PROJECTOR OFF) This death and resurrection were necessary to accomplish redemption and atonement. The death of Jesus was not a tragic accident. The death and resurrection of Jesus were part of a divine plan to display the Good Shepherd's divinity and to provide for our salvation.

IV.

Then in vv. 19-21 we find that THE GOOD SHEPHERD CAUSES DIVISION. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE GOOD SHEPHERD CAUSES DIVISION.) According to v. 19, **"There was again a division among the Jews because of these words."** The word for "division" is "schisma," from which we get our words "schism" and "schismatic."

We encounter here again the term “the Jews.” Most commentators take this to be a reference to a broader audience than just the religious leaders. There is division among the lay people and the religious leaders. This may be true, but it seems to me that the term “the Jews” is used consistently in John’s Gospel to refer to the religious leaders. At the end of #9 it was clear that Jesus was addressing the Pharisees. Also in #9 v. 16 it was clear that there was a minority among the Pharisees who disagreed with the majority. Nicodemus may have been among them. So perhaps there is still a minority of religious leaders here, including people like Nicodemus, who are raising questions about the majority view.

That view comes out in v. 20: **“Many of them said, ‘He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?’”** The other three Gospels speak of Jesus dealing with people who are demon possessed. The only reference to demons in John’s Gospel is to charges that the religious leaders make against Jesus and His replies to them. Probably these religious leaders are equating being demon-possessed with being insane.

To these opponents, for Jesus to claim that He is the Good Shepherd and then to speak about dying does not make sense. A shepherd only has value to his sheep if he stays alive and cares for them. To die would be to leave the flock defenseless. It would also irritate these religious leaders if they picked up the indication that Jesus was intending to reach out to Gentiles.

Verse 21: **“Others said, ‘These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’”** These could be words from some in the crowd. But they could come from minority members of the leadership like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin who later asks Pontius Pilate for the body of Jesus. The man born blind may still be in the audience. This faction finds it impossible to ignore the amazing miracle that Jesus has recently performed.

So there is division again. Jesus earlier in His ministry warned that He would cause division. In Matthew #10 vv. 34-36 (MATTHEW 10:34) He declared, **“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. (MATTHEW 10:35) For I have come to set a man against his father; and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. (MATTHEW 10:36) And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household.”** The Good Shepherd does cause division.

That continues to happen today. People live in families and in social groups and in work and school situations. When people become followers of Jesus, all of those relationships can be disrupted. (PROJECTOR OFF) I had a friend once who came from an Armenian Orthodox background. He became a born-again Christian, and it was very upsetting to his family. He left his Orthodox church and came to our Baptist church. His family perceived that as not just a rejection of their church, but their entire tradition. It was perceived as a rejection of their family heritage.

Jesus may cause division, but He is worth following. He is truly the Good Shepherd who cares for His sheep. He loves us and knows us and will bring us safely to heaven some day, if we have indeed put our trust in Him. I close with this benediction from the last chapter of the New Testament book of Hebrews. (PROJECTOR ON--- HEBREWS 13:20) Chapter 13 vv. 20 & 21: **“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, (HEBREWS 13:21) equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”**