

The Good Shepherd

From our life experiences we have learnt that there are people who help us and always desire that we be successful, safe, content, victorious, and that we enjoy every good thing. Some examples of these people are our parents, teachers, pastors, coaches, friends and so on. On the other hand, there are people who have hurt us in some way and indeed wish nothing good to happen to us. They deceive us, cheat us, lie about us, steal from us, set traps to make us fail, and so on.

Therefore, in navigating through this life, it is wise to be able to distinguish between those who seek our good and those who seek our destruction. We need those who have our best interest at heart. We need good parents, teachers, coaches and other positive influences. We cannot succeed in life without some good guidance and instruction. In fact we can be compared to sheep.

Many of us have little or no interaction with sheep, except when they are dead and appear as mutton on our plates. But shepherding sheep was a significant part of the culture while Jesus was on earth, and many around the world still depend on sheep for their livelihood. Sheep are vulnerable without a good leader, a good shepherd. Therefore it was quite fitting for Jesus to present a lesson on leading and following by referring to shepherd and sheep.

In John 10 Jesus teaches: (all scripture references are from the New International Version - NIV) *“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. 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. 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 the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. (John 10: 1-6)

The sheep are dependent on the shepherd. The sheep have learned to associate their shepherd with the opening and the closing of the gate. If someone enters the sheep pen by some other way then that one is an intruder, who must be avoided. The sheep know the voice of the shepherd. His is the voice to follow. From any other voice there must be a retreat.

In a similar way we need to learn the markers that differentiate between whom we should follow and whom we should shun. Furthermore, continual association with the right leader breeds easy recognition and confidence.

Among those listening to Jesus were the Pharisees, a significant group of religious leaders and teachers of the day. They did not understand the message. Certainly, they understood all about sheep, the need for the shepherd, the need to ensure the safety of the vulnerable sheep. But what is the real message? Jesus was not trying to confuse them. In fact, He was, arguably, just drawing them out, stirring up their interest, getting them anxious to get to the real meaning of the message. In the same way He wants us to understand His message.

In John 10: 7-11, Jesus gets to the point of all the sheep talk.

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. 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.

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

Jesus uses the sheep talk as a launchpad to address directly His relevance to us. We need "shepherds" to lead us. We live in a world of both natural forces and spiritual forces. The Apostle Paul summed it up this way: *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."* (Ephesians 6: 12). The spiritual forces are at work against us, to keep us separated from God, to restrict us to lives of anxiety, misery, fear and hopelessness.

Therefore, we need a shepherd who can provide positive, effective and victorious leadership in every situation and against every challenge. The good news is: the best shepherd is available to us. He is Jesus, the Good Shepherd. He has laid down His life on the cross for us, to prevent us from receiving the wages of our sins. He offers us life to the full. Life that has true meaning. Life that enjoys true peace, rest in our soul and spirit.

The Good Shepherd loves us. *"... While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Romans 5: 8) Death could not hold the Good Shepherd, the Son of God. He rose triumphantly from the grave. In Matthew 28: 1-6 we read: *After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.*

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

Jesus the Good Shepherd calls in Matthew 11:28: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* The Good Shepherd is willing, ready and able to lead us. How do we become His sheep? We believe everything He claims to be and commit ourselves to follow Him as He leads us.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16). Jesus, Our Good Shepherd, gives us life to the full, now and forever.