

Welcome again to our continued study on the Church and, over the last few weeks, the Metaphors of the Church. Over the past two weeks, we have had the pleasure and privilege of looking at one of my favorite passages of scripture...Psalm 23. We were able to trace the tremendous care and love the Great Shepherd has for His sheep through the picture of the flock's seasonal journey under the care of the shepherd. The psalm opens by declaring that, under our Lord's care, we will want for nothing. And it closes with the promise that we will dwell with Him in His house forever. What a difference it would make in our lives if we understood and believed these truths completely!

David comes to the metaphor of the shepherd and sheep very naturally...his years tending the flocks of his family would leave thoughts of pastoral care firmly in his mind. He would easily see the parallels between the care of the good shepherd for his sheep and the care of His Lord for His people. Jesus also uses the metaphor of sheep and shepherd to describe His relationship with His people...those that are adopted into His family...joint heirs with Him to the promises of God. As he describes that relationship in John 10, He contrasts true shepherds with false shepherds...those who only come to steal or harm the sheep. He also contrasts good shepherds with bad shepherds...with those who have no commitment, care, or sense of responsibility for the sheep. The metaphor presented here has a starkly different feel than what we read in Psalm 23. And the difference is in the audience being addressed.

In Psalm 23, the sheep are talking to, and about, their shepherd. These are sheep enjoying a life of bounty and peace under the care of their good shepherd. They are extolling his virtues and proclaiming their trust. They are expressing their love for the shepherd and contemplating his love for them. In John 10, however, we find Jesus, the Good Shepherd, addressing the scribes and Pharisees...and unmasking them as false shepherds and teachers.

The scribes and Pharisees were the ones trailing Jesus in His ministry, seeking to counter what He said and hoping to expose him as a fraud. They purported to be the leaders and teachers of Israel and found their positions threatened. They demanded that high honors be paid to them as appropriate to their office. They were dismissive of those they considered beneath them, those unworthy of God's attention...or their own. Do you remember the prideful prayer of the Pharisee who boasts before God that he is not like lesser men? We can read his "prayer" in Luke 18:10ff.

"God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

Jesus was well aware of the hypocrisy and greed of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus pronounces 8 "woes" upon them in Matt 23, where He accuses them of "devouring widow's houses" and indulging in self absorbed "showy" prayers. He calls them "blind guides" whose followers become "twice as fit for hell" as they are. He tells them that they follow the inconsequential matters of law but ignore the weightier ones; justice, mercy, and faithfulness. And He compares them to whitewashed tombs, appearing beautiful on the outside, but full of dead men's bones and uncleanness.

There is another "woe" pronounced by God against these self identified "shepherds" of Israel. Listen to how they are described in Ezekiel 34:2ff. And as we read, let your minds compare the character and care of the good shepherd displayed in Psalm 23 with those of the false shepherds we find here. Speaking to Ezekiel, God says,

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? 3 You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. 4 Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with

severity you have dominated them. 5 They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. 6 My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them.”

It is to this group...these false shepherds... that Jesus now speaks, in John 10:1ff, “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. 2 But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

The first thing that Jesus says is “Truly, truly I say to you.” This is the equivalent of saying, “Listen up folks...this is important!” The imagery that follows would be obvious to, and easily understood by, any member of a village or town. Most shepherds would not have a large enough flock to warrant a personal sheepfold or keeper...they would entrust their sheep to the village sheepfold, a walled enclosure that would be safe for the sheep during the night. Then, in the morning, they would go to the doorman of the sheepfold and go in to gather their sheep. The shepherd would know and call each sheep by name, and inspect them, both going into the fold at night and coming out of the fold each morning. Only the true shepherds had access to the sheep. And it is only the shepherd that the sheep follow, for they know his voice. The shepherd, then, goes out ahead of the sheep preparing their way, guiding their path, and ensuring their safety.

But look at the response of the scribes and Pharisees in verse 6. We read, “This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them.” Again, the imagery would have been obvious...but they just couldn’t comprehend that they were being cast as the “thieves and robbers” going over the wall and the “strangers” to the sheep. In the next verse, Jesus responds.

7 So Jesus said to them again, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. 9 I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have *it* abundantly. 11 “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters *them*. 13 *He flees* because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, 15 even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd.

The good and true shepherd gives his life for the sheep. The false shepherd comes in two flavors...the thief who takes the life of the sheep for himself and the hireling who leaves the sheep to destruction. Look again at Ezekiel 34. Isn’t this the same description of the false shepherds that we find there?

Before we leave this text, there are a couple more things worth pointing out. While they do not specifically address the metaphor of sheep and shepherd, they deserve to be looked at and can be an opportunity for further study and reflection. First, in John 10, we have a metaphor within a metaphor. Not only do we find the metaphor of Jesus as “the shepherd”, we have the metaphor of Jesus as “the door”. Only the true sheep...the sheep owned and acknowledged by the shepherd...have a right to enter the sheepfold or accompany the shepherd out of it. And Jesus declares himself the door to the sheepfold...no sheep enters except through Him. Only the sheep that enter through him are saved. The sheepfold, here, is a picture of salvation; of entering into the flock...the family...of God. But note that, at this moment in time, the flock in question is the chosen...the elect...of Israel. This is the second item of note. The gentiles...those being grafted in at a later date...are the

subject of verse 16, “**I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd.**”

So, to recap, what are the characteristics of the good shepherd? (We won’t bother to recap the characteristics of the sheep!) The good shepherd lives... and gives... his life on behalf of the sheep. He desires an abundant life for the sheep. He exercises his authority for the benefit of the sheep. He is vitally concerned with providing for their care and protection. He has an intimate relationship with his sheep...he knows them and calls them by name and they know him and follow his voice. He leads and guides his sheep, preparing the way before them. He endeavors to lead his sheep to places of rest and peace, so they might be at ease and untroubled. He rescues and restores his sheep when they are down cast or in trouble. It is apparent that the sheep are truly lost without a good shepherd. And we, as the sheep of His pasture, are truly lost without Him. It is my hope and prayer that anyone hearing these words that is not a member of Jesus flock...His family...would be drawn to the Great Shepherd and hear His words, “**I came that they may have life, and have *it* abundantly.**”

Finally, I would like to address a word to leaders of the church. We will be looking at the leadership of the church in a future study in this series but, for now, I would like to point out a singular truth...we have a model for our ministry in the metaphor of the Good Shepherd and we are expected to follow it.

In 1 Pet 5:1ff, Peter directly addresses his fellow elders, imploring them to follow the example of Jesus, the Great Shepherd when He says,,” **Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, 2 shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; 3 nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.**

Those who have been called by God to exercise leadership in His church have a model which they must follow. Whether we are called elder or pastor or team leader, we are all under-shepherds serving at the will, and under the direction, of the Chief Shepherd. We are not to serve just because there is a need... or because someone thinks we should...or because we are told we have “a gift” we owe to the church to exercise. This would be serving “under compulsion”. Instead, we are to serve voluntarily and eagerly, because we are called by the very will of God to serve the flock that He loves. We are called to follow the example of the Good Shepherd, diligently leading, guiding, protecting, feeding, disciplining, and healing the flock He has placed under our care. We are to be motivated by a sacrificial love for our sheep...looking out for their interests and well being over our own...and a love for our Great Shepherd.

There is an old story about a young man who approaches an older pastor and asks, “How do I know if I am called to pastoral ministry or to preach? The pastor’s answer is telling...”If you can do anything else, do that instead.” It is not so much a commentary on the difficulty of shepherding...(though it is) nor the qualifications necessary for shepherding...(though they are stringent)...it is ultimately a commentary on the importance of serving under God’s divine calling and oversight. For we will be held accountable for the quality of our care.

The author of Hebrews, at the end of his letter, enjoins his readers to “**Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.**

So, what are God’s words for His sheep? That we would be thankful for the care of our good shepherds, both heavenly and earthly. That we esteem them highly and bring them joy, not grief. That we commit to follow them, for our good, and theirs. And God’s word to shepherds? That we follow in the footsteps of our Chief Shepherd, spending ourselves on behalf of the flock, relying on our Lord, and teaching our beloved sheep to do the same...and in the end, receiving an “unfading crown of glory”. Let us pray.