

## Jesus Is the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-18

Sunday, April 10, 2022

What if the Gospels were written in our lifetime? What word pictures might Jesus use to communicate today? Would he speak in parables about fishing and farming when more than half our world now lives in cities? Would Jesus speak about wheat, yeast, and bread to a culture where few bake and most buy bread from the store? Would he teach people in person or would he post videos to TikTok and YouTube?

This might seem silly, but raises the question, why did Jesus choose the metaphors he did to illustrate his teaching? Why did he compare himself to a vine in John 15 or to bread from heaven in John 6? And why, in John 10, did Jesus introduce the picture of a sheep pen into the conversation? Let's open our Bibles to John 10 and look together at another one of Jesus's *I am* statements.

Seven times in John's Gospel Jesus used the words *I am* to introduce a statement about his true identity. Our passage is a two-for-one; Jesus gives us two *I am* statements. First, the Lord declared himself to be *the gate* to the sheep pen. Second, Jesus identified himself as *the good shepherd*. We'll consider both metaphors in detail, but first, let's consider *why* Jesus spoke about sheep and shepherds in the first place.

If we were to read to the end of the chapter, we would see a hard break between the events of John 10 and the story in John 11. We'll look at John 11 next Sunday and consider Jesus's statement, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25, NIV). But if we look at how the previous chapter ends, we see that Jesus was addressing the same audience in both John 9 and 10. In John 9, the central event was that Jesus had healed a man who was blind from birth. As word about that miracle spread, the news about Jesus reached the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were the Jewish religious leaders of the day that were primarily concerned with keeping God's law and how people kept it. Instead of celebrating sight given to a blind man, the Pharisees were greatly troubled that Jesus did these things on the Sabbath. According to their interpretation of the law, anyone who violated the Sabbath was a sinner, and in their minds, Jesus was guilty on multiple counts. They were convinced that God would never use a Sabbath-breaker to do his work, therefore Jesus could not have been God's prophet nor was he the rumored Messiah.

But the formerly-blind man knew otherwise. He could see—both physically and spiritually—that Jesus was who he claimed to be. But to confess that Jesus was the Christ was guilt by association in the eyes of the Pharisees. In other words, these self-proclaimed guardians of the gate were more concerned with the state of the sheep pen than they were with the care of God's flock. Look at how John 10 begins:

<sup>1</sup> “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. <sup>2</sup> The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” <sup>6</sup> Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them (John 6:1-6, NIV).

The story of the blind man in John 9 and the negative response that followed is the setup for the word picture that Jesus paints in John 10. **Jesus used a figure of speech, by pointing to an ordinary example from daily life, in order to illustrate important claims about his true identity and his relationship with his people.**

Let me say that again: *Jesus used a figure of speech, by pointing to an ordinary example from daily life, in order to illustrate an important claim about his true identity and his relationship with his people.* The first six verses of John 10 are the foundation on which Jesus builds in order to reveal who he is and how he relates to his people.

John calls Jesus’s illustration a *figure of speech* (v. 6). He doesn’t use the word *parable* in his Gospel the way that Matthew, Mark, and Luke do. Jesus used parables in a variety of ways during his ministry. Sometimes he would explain their meaning, and other times he would leave the interpretation to his hearers. In John 6, the figure of speech is there to teach us something about Jesus’s identity. But we should be careful not to overinterpret the picture beyond what Jesus intended. We’ll see in a moment that Jesus used the picture in one way and then he changed the metaphor in another way to say something else.

The picture that Jesus paints would have been an ordinary example from daily life for Jesus’s original hearers and for John’s first readers. I imagine that not too many of us have first-hand knowledge of caring for sheep. Perhaps those of you who do could describe for the rest of us after the service more of the sights, sounds, and smells that go along with raising sheep. Even if we have no personal experience, the illustration isn’t hard to picture.

Imagine a village with a courtyard surrounded by a stone wall. Within this courtyard or sheep pen are flocks of sheep owned by the villagers. There is an opening in the pen that is secured by a gate. As you walk by the pen you notice a neighbor being let in by the gatekeeper. You know your neighbor owns one of the flocks and that he is their shepherd. He calls to his flock and one by one his sheep follow him through the gate and out into the pasture. The other flocks remain in the pen; they know this is not their shepherd.

Then later in the evening as you walk by that same courtyard, you notice a shadowy figure approaching. Something isn't right. This stranger is climbing over the outer wall and into the pen. The flock is in danger. He is no shepherd; he's a thief. The sheep are frightened by him; they don't recognize his voice.

Jesus's story was an ordinary example of everyday life. It was so ordinary that the Pharisees failed to see what this story about thieves, shepherds, and sheep had to do with healing the blind, obeying the sabbath, and Jesus's credentials. But those who claimed to know God's Word should have recognized what Jesus said about himself.

The first claim that Jesus makes in this passage shows up in verses 7-10. Follow along with me as I read those verses.

<sup>7</sup> Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup> All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> 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 10:7-10).

We might expect Jesus to say, "I am the good shepherd" (v. 11, 14), but it sounds odd to hear him say, "I am the gate for the sheep" (v. 7, cf. v. 9). Again, picture the courtyard scene and imagine the gated entrance to the enclosure. The gate served two purposes: it let the sheep out so they could go and find pasture, and it let the sheep back in where they could be safely and securely protected.

To say that he is the gate means that **Jesus protects and provides for his sheep so that his people may have life to the full.**

There can be one and only gate for the sheep. Only Jesus can promise that "whoever enters through me will be saved" (v. 9). But there were others who had preceded Jesus who sought to capture the attention of the sheep and lead them into danger. Some were false Messiahs who promised people freedom and fullness of life. They sought out followers, but like thieves and robbers, their intent was not to give life, but rather they came "only to steal and kill and destroy" (v. 10a).

These phony saviors are still active in our world today. They may not claim to be a messiah, but they do make messianic promises just the same. You'll find them on bookshelves promising people the secret to happiness and offering simple steps to living your best life now. You'll find them on the campaign trail promising people true freedom through hope and change, promising greener pastures by restoring a nation to its former greatness, and by promising restoration of the soul by building back better than ever. You'll find them in church pulpits promising churchgoers health, wealth, and prosperity in the name of a false Jesus who wants his people to live high

on the hog like sons and daughters of the King. They promise much, but ultimately they cannot deliver. None can offer what Jesus does. They can't provide true protection and provision, only death and destruction. Jesus said, "I came that [my sheep] may have life, and have it to the full" (v. 10). **Jesus protects and provides for his sheep so that his people may have life to the full.**

We probably don't spend as much time in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel as we do in the Psalms or in parts of the New Testament. But Jesus did. There's a passage in Ezekiel 34 that speaks about sheep and shepherds that Jesus had in mind when he said to the Pharisees in John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd."

Keep your finger on John 10 but turn with me to Ezekiel 34. If you're using a blue church Bible, you'll find Ezekiel 34 on page 1344.

The first part of the passage is a word of rebuke against Israel's failed religious leaders. Follow along starting in Ezekiel 34:1,

<sup>1</sup> The word of the Lord came to me: <sup>2</sup> "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?' <sup>3</sup> You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. <sup>6</sup> My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them. (Ezekiel 34:1-6, NIV).

But then the tone of the passage changes. Starting in verse 11, God no longer speaks of what these shepherds failed to do, he speaks about what *he* will do for his sheep. Let's continue reading from Ezekiel 34:11.

<sup>11</sup> " 'For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. <sup>12</sup> As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. <sup>13</sup> I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. <sup>14</sup> I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup> I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. <sup>16</sup> I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.

I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice (Ezekiel 34:11-16, NIV).

God promises to shepherd his people. He will search for them, he will look after them, he will bring them into the safety of the sheep pen and he will lead them out to feed and flourish in the pasture. We can hear the words of David, a former shepherd turned king of Israel who saw himself as a sheep under the care of God. David said,

<sup>1</sup> The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. <sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, <sup>3</sup> he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. (Psalm 23:1-3, NIV).

David knew he need a shepherd, the kind of shepherd that only God could be.

But then God expanded on his promise in Ezekiel 34. He said,

<sup>23</sup> I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.

This prophecy came to Ezekiel about 400 years *after* David's life. So the shepherd that God spoke of must refer to someone else. In Ezekiel 34:23-24 the LORD promised that one day he would send his people a shepherd, one from the line of King David who would tend to God's flock as his servant. This was a promise of the coming Messiah.

With this in mind, let's turn back to John 10. Remember, **Jesus used a figure of speech, by pointing to an ordinary example from daily life, in order to illustrate important claims about his true identity and his relationship with his people.**

In John 10:11 and again in verse 14, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." What the Pharisees failed to understand was that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises made in Ezekiel 34. God *had* come to shepherd his flock. God had finally sent the promised Son of David, the Messianic Servant to be the good shepherd for his sheep.

Jesus will now show that he fulfills the role of shepherd in a way that no ordinary shepherd could.

**Jesus is the good shepherd who willfully lays down his life for his sheep whom he lovingly calls, and in obedience to his Father whom he lovingly obeys.**

Picking back up in John 10:11 and following, Jesus says,

<sup>11</sup> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—<sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. <sup>17</sup> The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. <sup>18</sup> 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 10:11-18, NIV).

Five times Jesus says that he “lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11, 15, 17, 18).

How many of our students, or how many of you parents and grandparents have a teenager who will start their first real job this summer? When I was in high school, I bagged groceries, I bused tables, and I ran the register at a toy store. Imagine that one evening at your summer job, a man comes in and demands that you empty the register and hand over the cash. As an employee, you don’t want to see your employer robbed or customers harmed, yet you aren’t looking to be a hero and put yourself in danger.

But things change if you’re the owner. In that case, you’ve got more to lose if the thief gets what he wants. You’ll take a greater risk than one of your employees, but still, you’ll try to avoid any violence if possible. But neither the owner nor the employee would stand outside the store seeking a way to sacrifice themselves for those inside.

But Jesus promises his flock that he will never abandon us in the face of danger. The good shepherd is not like the hired hand who does not truly care for the sheep.

Folks, no one loves the sheep more than the good shepherd. No one loves you the way Jesus does—not your heroes, not your idols, not your boyfriend or girlfriend, not your fiancé or your spouse, and not even your friends and family. Some of them do love you, but no one loves you the way Jesus does. As the Apostle Paul said in Romans 5,

<sup>7</sup> Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:7-8, NIV).

Jesus is the good shepherd who willfully lays down his life for his sheep. It’s important that we hear what Jesus says in verse 18:

<sup>18</sup> No one takes [my life] 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.

As we approach Good Friday and consider the cross of Jesus, let's not for a second think that his life was taken from him. Though his enemies had him arrested, beaten, and unjustly condemned, and though the Romans crucified him, our Lord was calling the shots. Not only did Jesus demonstrate his authority to lay down his life for his sheep, three days later Jesus took it up again and was raised from the dead, a truth we will celebrate next Sunday.

How incredible that the good shepherd knows his sheep and his sheep know him. The first sheep to respond were called out of the sheep pen of Judaism and came through the gate in faith as they followed their Messiah. But Jesus made it clear that his flock would grow beyond those first fully devoted followers. He said,

<sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Church family, if you're not of Jewish descent, that means you! Jesus is the good shepherd who willfully lays down his life for *you* whom he lovingly calls that he might know you as his sheep and that you might know him as your good shepherd.

But let's make one more observation before we close. Reading on in verse 15, we see that Jesus knows his sheep and his sheep know him— “just as the Father knows [the Son] and [the Son] knows the Father” (John 10:15, NIV). Our relationship with our good shepherd mirrors that of Jesus's relationship with his Heavenly Father.

There's much that can be said about the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son, but one thing we can take away from these verses is that our relationship with our good shepherd is intended to be intimate. This is where the sheep/shepherd analogy really can only *point* us to the greater relationship we have with Jesus. The shepherd may have a deep affection for his flock, but Jesus the good shepherd desires an intimate relationship with his church, one where the flock truly knows him and is known by him.

In this passage about sheep pens and gates, thieves and gatekeepers, shepherds and sheep, **Jesus used a figure of speech, by pointing to an ordinary example from daily life, in order to illustrate important claims about his true identity and his relationship with his people.** May we grow in our relationship with our good shepherd as we increasingly come to understand just how much our good shepherd loves us, his sheep.