

# John 10:11-18 The Good Shepherd

## Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

**Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John. Glory to you, O Lord.**

**John 10:11-18** starting from verse 1 (Living Bible)

*"I tell you the truth, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! But the one who*

*enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don't know his voice."*

*Those who heard Jesus use this illustration didn't understand what he meant, so he explained it to them: "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life."*

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep.

“I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.

“The Father loves me because I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again. For this is what my Father has commanded.”

**This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.**

- How do shepherds wake up in the morning? – With an a-lamb clock
- Where do shepherds go to get their hair cut? – At the baaa-baaa’s
- What is a shepherd’s favourite hymn? – Amazing Graze

Yes, today we are thinking about The Good Shepherd, but I’m going to take those in reverse order.

**Shepherd. Good. The.**

Let’s start with prayer:

May my spoken words  
reflect your written word  
and point us to your living word,  
Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

## Context

First, a bit of context. Our passage is part of a longer sequence and it’s important to know what went before so we can see why Jesus is talking about being a good shepherd. Right back at the start of chapter 8 Jesus comes to the Jerusalem temple and a crowd gathers. The Jewish leaders bring the woman caught in adultery (we note that they didn’t bring the man) in order to trap Jesus. Jesus does that enigmatic writing on the ground and turns the challenge back on the accusers. One by one, the leaders slink away.

Then Jesus talks about being the light of the world and the leaders return and question his right to speak, but Jesus replies that God is backing him up. That’s quite a claim! Even worse, he refers to God as ‘My Father’ and tells the leaders that their father is the devil! Unsurprisingly, things start getting a little heated. There’s a bit of racist name calling on one side and some firm rebukes on the other, ending with

the mic-drop moment: “Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am!”

The leaders try to stone Jesus for such blasphemy but he slips away and, coming upon a blind man in the temple courts, restores his sight.

Problem. It’s the Sabbath. There then follows an entire chapter of argy-bargy about why Jesus healed on the Sabbath, and can a law-breaker be heard by God, and is this actually the blind man or does it just look like him, and let’s check with his parents, and “He’s a grown up, ask him yourselves!”

The final verse before the Good Shepherd discourse in chapter 10 is Jesus telling the Jewish leaders that they’re doing it wrong, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.” Ouch!

## Shepherd

And now, finally, we get to the stuff about sheep. There’s a lot about sheep in John’s gospel. Right back in chapter 1, John the Baptist says of Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” and the final page of this gospel has the beautiful story of Jesus commissioning Peter with the words, “Feed my sheep.”

In our passage, the picture language gets a little mixed – Jesus the sheep becomes the shepherd, and he is also the gate, although that would not sound quite so odd to ancient ears because shepherds in the open country would often sleep in the entrance to the sheepfold, thus being both the gate through which sheep enter and are saved and the one who will lead out them out to pasture in the morning.

But this image of the guarding, guiding shepherd is not found only in John’s gospel; it’s throughout the Bible, and it is God who shepherds his people. Psalm 23 is the most famous example, but we find this imagery from Genesis, as Jacob, on his deathbed, says that God had been his “shepherd all of his life to this day,” (48:15) through Isaiah’s “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm and gently lead those that are with young,” (40:11) right through to Revelation when the saints in white stand around the throne of the Lamb who “will be their shepherd and will lead them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (7:17)

## Good

So, shepherd. It's a big deal. And God is the perfect shepherd. But when he calls some of the flock (to mix my metaphors somewhat) to be sheep dogs or under-shepherds of God's flock, we get more of a pick-and-mix result. Moses, Joshua and David were pretty good. Others, more like leopards than shepherds.

The Old Testament prophets had strong words for these uncaring leaders. Ezekiel (34) was particularly harsh. "Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves!" he thunders. "You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock." Jesus echoed this in his scathing denunciation of the teachers of the law and Pharisees who "tie up heavy loads and put them on other people's backs, but are not willing to lift a finger to help." (Matt 23)

So when Jesus contrasted the *good* shepherd (himself) with the feckless hired hand who runs off and leaves the sheep to the wolves, it was clear whom he was pointing the finger at, and the religious leaders knew – oh they knew!

It's a salutatory lesson to us all, whether we're in positions of leadership or just plain old grass-

guzzling sheep. Here it is from 1 Corinthians 10, in the Message translation – I love this. **"We are just as capable of messing it up as they were. Don't be so naive and self-confident. You're not exempt. You could fall flat on your face as easily as anyone else. Forget about self-confidence; it's useless. Cultivate God-confidence."** (10:12)

## The

We've looked at Shepherd. We've looked at Good. Now, The. *The* Good Shepherd. Not 'a', not one of many, not 'Choose your favourite shepherd from this selection', 'The'. There is one. One flock, one shepherd.

But this vision of unity does not mean uniformity. This one flock is gathered from many sheepfolds or the word can also mean courtyard, an area with a few houses around. Many people in Bible times would own a sheep or two to provide milk and wool for the family. We know that Jesus was brought up in a builder's workshop, but I bet they had chickens and goats out the back. Free eggs and a garbage disposal! And they would be almost family pets with names, like we give to dogs.

These sheep and goats would need taking out to pasture, and so we have the picture of the householder opening the gate of the courtyard and the shepherd calling the sheep by name and leading them out. We're not talking the huge herds of identical hundreds that we have today. These were scrappy mixed flocks of sheep and goats, all kinds of odds and ends, one with a gammy leg, one with half an ear, that weird one at the back but, hey he's family.

Is that not a wonderful picture of the church?

And here's something worth noting that we find both in this passage and in that famous psalm of David. The sheep are led to green pasture and quiet waters, not because they have somehow earned it by producing gallons of milk or pounds of wool, but simply because of the character of the shepherd. "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness *for his name's sake*." The shepherd is good, and provides for the sheep because that is what they need. Not what they deserve or have earned, what they need.

And they are all together. There is no posh pasture for the 'better' sheep. The sleek and fat sheep graze alongside the skinny and bony ones. That one with the wonky leg alongside the pristine show lamb. One

flock, one shepherd. No status, no favouritism. All are provided for, all are guarded in the valley of shadow, exactly the same.

## Conclusion

So maybe today you feel like you're the sheep with the wonky leg, not quite up to snuff.

Or perhaps you're the over-achiever, trying your best to deserve your place. "Look at this wool – quality stuff that. I bet I've grown half a jumper's worth today."

Maybe you're a young or injured sheep that needs to be carried right now. You'll be carried if that's what you need.

Or you might be just a run-of-the-mill grass-guzzler, head down, same as a million others, nobody notices me. You are noticed. You are known by name.

Whatever kind of sheep you are, there is a place for you in the flock. We don't all have to be the same – we're from different sheepfolds – but we all belong, yes even that weird one at the back (not that I'm looking at anyone in particular, but you know who you are) – one flock, one shepherd. And the shepherd is good.

