I Am the Good Shepherd

John 10
D.L. Deckard
March 15, 2015

There’s a joke that hikers and backpackers tell, which really isn’t all that funny. But it betrays a fundamental human motivation. It goes something like this—if you run into an angry bear with a group of hikers, you don’t have to be the fastest runner in the group to escape. All you have to be is faster than the slowest guy. The slow guy will get eaten and the rest will get away. I’m sure most of you have heard some form of that sick humor before. The joke, of course, assumes that self-preservation is the great motivation—“It’s too bad my friend Wally got eaten, but at least I survived.” As facetious as that sounds, that spirit of self-preservation (or self-satisfaction is its positive counterpart) drives most human behavior.

That’s what makes someone like King David in the Bible, such a remarkable character. When he was a boy he was given the responsibility of guarding and protecting his father’s sheep. Twice, David said his sheep were attacked—once by a bear and another by a lion (1 Samuel 17:34-35). Most boys would have given in to the instinct of self-preservation and run for their lives. Not David. He rose up to save his sheep—even a single lamb the text says—and killed the enemy. That’s the opposite of self-preservation. It’s heroic self-sacrifice.

At some point in his life, he realized that what he was for his sheep, Yahweh was for his people. So he wrote about it in Psalm 23:1, “The LORD [Yahweh] is my shepherd.” And he’s not a Shepherd that is motivated by self-preservation. In the middle of the darkest valleys where death lurks and the enemy waits in ambush, “You are with me. Your rod and staff comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). In other words, when the lion comes, Yahweh doesn’t abandon his sheep. In fact, the prophets declared that the day would come when Yahweh would shepherd his people personally in a whole new way.

15 I [Yahweh] myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. 16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. (Eze 34:15-16 italics added)

Given this, you can imagine the significance of Jesus’ words in John 10. After giving sight to a blind man in chapter 9 (a needy, broken, helpless sheep), Jesus says, “I am the good Shepherd” (John 10:11, 14). Yahweh had come. But he didn’t come in the spirit of self-preservation, which is what makes him good.

The Illustration

To understand the implications of what Jesus says about himself as the good Shepherd, let’s consider the flow of text. Verses 1-6 provide an opening illustration about sheep and shepherd.

1 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6 This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.
You can picture Jesus’ illustration even if you’ve never seen a shepherd and sheep before. There would be a common pen or corral in which different families would put their sheep at night, and guarded by a hired hand. During the night, if anyone attempted to get at the sheep by any other way than coming through the main gate, they probably have malicious motives to poach and steal. But the true owner of the sheep comes to the gate where he would be recognized by the watchman and welcomed. The shepherd would speak and his sheep would recognize the distinctiveness of his voice and come baa-ing the whole time. Those who belonged to other families would stay behind. The recognition of voice is really no different than children to their mothers. My friends Walter and Joe had a mom that you could hear from a mile away. And when it was time for dinner she’d yell, “Joseph! Walter!” They knew it was time to go home. It was their mom’s voice. It clearly wasn’t my mom, so I’d stay behind. The same thing is true with sheep. They know whom they belong to and respond. That’s the illustration.

From this illustration of shepherd, gate and sheep, Jesus draws out two features that he’s going to apply to himself and expand upon—the **door** of the sheep pen and the **shepherd**. As tough as it may be to visualize Jesus as being both, that’s what he’s saying.

### The Door

7 So Jesus again said to them, “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 listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by 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.

In referring to himself as the door—or the gate of the sheep pen, he’s declaring that he is the exclusive means of entry and exit. For sheep the gate is the key to life. During the day, the sheep go through the gate to green pastures of provision. And they come back in through the gate in the evening for protection from predators. The gate provides both a means to **provision** and **protection**. Jesus’ point, then, in calling himself the door is to teach us that that **he is the exclusive means of eternal provision and eternal protection**—“if any one enters by me, he will be saved and will go in [provision] and out and find pasture [provision]. Another way of stating it is that Jesus is the sole means of **security** and **satisfaction**.

The unbelieving world we live in draws its relative sense of life, security and satisfaction, from the world. If we have money in the bank we feel a growing sense of security (protection) and satisfaction (provision). If we don’t then we feel insecure and unsatisfied. If our bodies look good, then we feel an increased sense of personal security and satisfaction. Once it fades and wrinkles form, then we feel insecure and unsatisfied. That’s the world we live in. It draws its sense of those two things from from material things and favorable conditions. Jesus instructs us that true protection and provision, real life, security and satisfaction is found exclusively in a relationship with him. No other person, place or thing can take us there. Only he can provide true rest.

But Jesus transitions from the impersonal picture of a gate to a very personal picture of a shepherd. And here we see the heart of what makes Jesus such a good shepherd.

### The Shepherd

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 does not own 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 cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me...
and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 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. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 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.” (John 10:1-18)

What Jesus says of himself here should be deeply satisfying to the new heart. It declares to us several reasons why he is the good Shepherd. He’s not just a Shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd for his people.

First, he is good because of his sacrificial love. A hired hand only works for money. If the job gets too costly, he leaves. Jesus is not like that. Nor is he like the backpacking joke—one who runs away when the bear attacks to save his own skin. Never! He came into the world precisely to face the lion and the bear on our behalf. The greatest predators of humanity are the three D’s: Devil, Death and Depravity. All three are hell-bent on our eternal destruction. All three have contaminated and corrupted our world. All three guarantee a final encounter between Creator and creation will ensue in final judgment.

The good Shepherd, our good Shepherd, came to disarm and destroy these three enemies by laying his life down willingly to absorb the curse of our depravity and disarm the devil of his power. And now he is ever-present with us in the valley of shadows promising never to leave us nor forsake us. Kind of ironic don’t you think? Normally sheep die to feed and support the shepherd and his family. In this picture it’s the Shepherd who is led to the slaughter on behalf of us sheep.

He is the good Shepherd also because of his sovereign grace. The work of our good shepherd was not a contingent or potential work as in, “I sure hope people will listen to me and come to me.” Jesus says:

14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 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. (John 10:14-16)

There is the clear ring of sovereignty and certainty in what he says here, “I know my own and they know me,” which doesn’t include everyone. Many of the Jewish people of Jesus’ day would reject him. The reason for this, Jesus would say, “Because they don’t know my voice.” Just as seeing they couldn’t see in chapter 9, so hearing they cannot hear in chapter 10. There are others outside the flock of Israel—not of this fold (Gentiles like us)—that Jesus “must bring” and they “will listen” to his voice. The purpose of Jesus is clear. He must save his people. He will save his people.

As stated several weeks ago, this truth of Jesus’ sovereignty over whom he saves is not meant to diminish the importance of responsible choice or to exclude would-be followers. The purpose is to humble human pride, secure people in his love and insist on the comprehensiveness of grace. If you truly believe in him this morning, it’s because he healed the deaf ears of your heart and you heard his voice. The good Shepherd sought you out like a lost lamb and brought you into the fold—not because you were born into a Jewish family or Catholic family or because you were more spiritually sensitive than the next guy. We believe in Jesus because he first called us and gave us ears to hear his voice.

But he ends on a note of victory. He is the good Shepherd because of his power over death. 18 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” (John 10:18). Jesus’ life was not ripped from him passively. He willingly and intentionally laid down his life and permitted them to crucify him. And just as he laid down his life with full authority, so he rose again with full authority. So...just as death wasn’t the final word in Jesus’ life, so it will not be in the lives of his flock. He’s given us life through his death. He has formed you into his people by his grace. And he will raise you to life in his power!

Now I admit that oftentimes, we don’t feel the weight of what Jesus says here because we feel so self-sufficient. Most of us here are in reasonable health. Most of us in here have a place to live. Most of us in here are probably, to one degree or another, mentally stable. Because of that we don’t sense need or desperation for the good Shepherd. But when we’re brought to a place of true vulnerability and weakness our inner being cries out for someone to be there with and for us. I was reminded of that last September when my wife Deanna went in for surgery. If you know my wife, then you know she’s a pretty strong personality with a strong sense of independence. (I like that about her.) In the hours before her surgery, however, she felt that sense of vulnerability and fear—fear of going under and being helpless and at the mercy of the surgeon’s hands. In the hour before she went in she just wanted me to hold her hand and pray with her. When they rolled her away through the doors, I swallowed hard. She was helpless. I was helpless. It’s in those moments of helplessness that our mortality and true weakness sets in. Self-sufficiency is stripped away and human strength is broken. The deep need for something beyond us is exposed—the need ultimately for a good Shepherd who loved us through death and beyond death. She went through the surgery well then started to come to—and this is the funny part of the story. When she woke up there was a large African American nurse standing by her side. And she felt such need that she asked him if she could hold his hand—a total stranger. When it’s all stripped away, what the mortal human heart needs is to know that it’s cared for and loved. And there is no deeper care or enduring love than what we find in our relationship with Jesus who is and will always be our good Shepherd, who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death and into the light of the new creation.

All this to say, he can and should be trusted and followed! When prosperity surrounds you, follow his voice. When happiness abounds, listen to his voice. When cancer comes upon you, cast yourself on his voice. When marriage is hard, listen to his voice. When grief envelops you, hold onto his voice. And when death comes upon you, find your hope in his voice. He is, and forever will be, our good Shepherd.