

## John 10 – The Good Shepherd

Our New Testament reading for the day (following the Bible Companion planner) brings us to consider the Lord Jesus Christ as a spiritual Shepherd:

“I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” (Jno. 10:11)

And again:

“I am the good shepherd, and I know my sheep, and am known of mine” (Jno. 10:14).

This aspect of being a Shepherd is a familiar one in Scripture: there are others who also fulfilled that role. In our exhortation today, we shall consider the Shepherd role, and see how it all points to the sacrificial work of our Redeemer.

### *CAIN AND ABEL*

The first shepherd mentioned in the Holy Writ is Abel. Of him it is testified that “Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground” (Gen. 4:2). And in this context, we also have the offering up of sheep as a sacrifice with which Yahweh was well pleased:

“... and in the process of time, it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto Yahweh. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And Yahweh had respect unto Abel and to his offering: but unto Cain and his offering he had not respect” (Gen. 4:3-5).

Being the firstborn, Cain led the way in making his offering first. He brought the fruit of the ground – the product of his own labours – and assumed that this would be accepted by Yahweh. But the Divine commentary on the matter leaves no doubt as to how serious an error this was. Just like those of our day who claim the right to worship in any way they please, Cain also offered on his own terms, and not those of his Maker. So we have Cain referred to, after he slew his brother Abel:

“... Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? *Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous*” (1 Jno. 3:12)

Notice the strength of language used here: it was not simply that Cain didn’t understand, or that he had a different point of view to Abel on how to worship. “his own works were *evil*”. This demonstrates the seriousness in offering to God in the way that we see fit, and not as prescribed by Yahweh himself.

Abel on the other hand, recognised the need for sacrifice, and “Yahweh had respect unto Abel and unto his offering”. His works were “righteous” and were accepted by the Lord. The one was “evil”, the other “righteous” – and so it is today. We must offer according to that which our Master requires, and not in the way that pleases us. The Lord chooses to accept sacrifice as the basis of our worship – even our Redeemer, the antitypical Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. But also, we offer up our lives before Him – as “a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1) – a life devoted to Yahweh in service.

Being that Cain was not a shepherd, but a tiller of the cursed ground, he ought to have approached his brother in order to obtain a lamb to offer as a sacrifice. Yet instead, he slew his Shepherd brother out of envy. In Abel therefore, we have the basis of personal sacrifice for acceptable worship: the offering up of a lamb, and the laying down his life at the hands of a wicked man – principles which are bound up together in our Lord Jesus Christ.

### *JACOB*

The next shepherd in Scripture is Jacob. He served Laban for 7 years each to claim Laban’s daughters as his wives, and then a further 6 years for his cattle (Gen. 31:41). He was a hireling (cp. Gen. 30:33, 31:41): the sheep were not his, but he took care of them as if they were. So we read in Genesis 31:

“These twenty years have I been with thee; thy ewes and thy she-goats have not cast their young, and the rams of thy flock have I not eaten. That which was torn of beasts I brought not unto thee;

I bare the loss of it; of my hand didst thou require it, whether stolen by day, or stolen by night. Thus I was; in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes. Thus have I been twenty years in thy house ...” (Gen. 31:38-41).

Jacob then, although a hireling, was a good shepherd: he was the model example of a conscientious servant before Laban. He looked after and cared for the sheep, and was blessed by Yahweh for so doing.

### **MOSES**

The life of Moses can be divided into 3 periods of 40 years each:

- When he lived in Egypt, as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter
- Looking after his father in law’s sheep for 40 years in the wilderness
- Another 40 years in the wilderness shepherding the flock of God.

Moses then, spent 80 years as a shepherd in the wilderness, 40 years looking after animals, and 40 years tending to the flock of God. Isaiah 63 describes Moses in these terms:

“... then he remembered the days of old, Moses, and his people, saying, Where is he that brought them up out of the sea with *the shepherd of his flock?* Where is he that put his holy spirit within him? That led them by the right hand of Moses with his glorious arm, dividing the water before them, to make himself an everlasting name ...” (Isa. 63:11-12).

And this is alluded to in a description of our Lord Jesus Christ:

“... now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great *shepherd of the sheep*, through the blood of the everlasting covenant make you perfect in every good work to do his will ...” (Heb. 13:20-21).

Moses, then, led the people through the sea, as a shepherd leading his flock. Notice, how that the waters foreshadowed Baptism – a spiritual death and resurrection (cp. 1 Cor. 10:1-2). In Type, Moses led the way through death into victory at the other side. Even so, Messiah leads his flock through death and beyond, to a newness of life, when the old man of the flesh will finally be set at naught.

### **KING DAVID**

Another well-known example of a Shepherd in Scripture is that of David. He was a keeper of his father’s sheep, and like Jacob, was a good Shepherd. He defended the sheep from the wild animals:

“... David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father’s sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock. And I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he hath defied the armies of the Living God” (1 Sam. 17:34-36).

So it was that David, the future shepherd-king, would destroy the enemies of his people, just as he had destroyed the lion and a bear in his capacity of Shepherd.

Interestingly, however, as well as being a Shepherd, David was also a sheep! So we read in Psalm 23:

“Yahweh 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 ...” (Psa. 23 – see whole Psalm for context)

David then, recognised Yahweh as being his shepherd, implying that he was a sheep, or lamb, being led by Him. In this dual capacity, he points forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is also a Shepherd in a certain relationship of things, and a Sheep in another. Hence, of him it is written:

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is *brought as a lamb* to the slaughter, and *as a sheep* before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.” (Isa. 53:7).

### **THE LORD JESUS CHRIST**

Returning to our reading of John chapter 10, we read that “... the sheep *hear his voice*: and he calleth his own sheep *by name*, and leadeth them out” (Jno. 10:3). There are two aspects here: firstly to our Lord, the individual sheep that he is caring for are not merely numbers, but he knows them intimately by name. And then secondly, the sheep themselves recognise his voice, and trust in him. These two aspects come out a number of times in this chapter:

“I am the good shepherd, and *I know* my sheep, and *am known* of mine” (verse 14)

“My sheep *hear my voice*, and *I know them*, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish” (verses 27-28).

There is great comfort in these things: it is written elsewhere that “the Lord knoweth them that are his” (2 Tim. 2:19). He is not a hireling who is only interested in personal gain from tending the flock. He knows each sheep by name, and will seek after those who go astray (Mat. 18:12). He has a personal loving interest in each of his lambs, ensuring that none of them will perish. Indeed, he laid down his life for the sheep (vs 15), that they might have life, and have it more abundantly. And in like manner, they know him also: they recognise and trust in his voice, as he calls out to each one of them in turn.

### **HEARING THE SHEPHERD’S VOICE**

It is important therefore, for us to listen to the voice of our Shepherd. As Gentiles, we come under his care, as sheep from another fold being adopted by him: “other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and *they shall hear my voice*; and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd” (Jno. 10:16).

Though we came from a different source, and a different flock, as these “other sheep,” we became united into his flock, to form “one flock” under the care and protection of “one shepherd”. We also learn, and hear the voice of our Master. But by contrast the Jews did not hear:

“and in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, *By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand*; And seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people’s heart is waxed gross, And *their ears are dull of hearing*, And their eyes have they closed: lest at anytime they should see with their eyes, And *hear with their ears*, And should understand with their heart, And should be converted, And I should heal them” (Mat. 13:14-15).

These examples are written for our admonition, lest we fall as did they. It is all too easy to criticize the hardness of heart displayed by that generation who saw the Lord in person, but we must ensure that we are different to that, seeking to hear every word pronounced by the Voice of our Shepherd.

Whilst the Lord Jesus Christ was the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4), he also appointed a Spirit-guided eldership to nurture and look after the early believers. Hence his Apostle Paul spoke to the Divinely appointed eldership at Ephesus:

“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which *the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers*, to feed the ecclesia of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall *grievous wolves* enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:28-30).

Notice that here, there are foes from within, and from without. The wolf-like persecutors enter in from without, but the perverse teachers from within. Our Master also refers to the wolves that would ravage the flock:

*“I am the good shepherd*: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth *the wolf* coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. *I am the good shepherd ...*” (Jno. 10:11-13).

Notice that here, it is the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Good Shepherd, who was willing to lay down his life for the sheep's protection and deliverance. The implication here, is that the wolf would take his life, for it was in the face of such danger, that he gave it. So it was that the Roman wolf took the life of the Master at the instigation of the people of Israel – and in turn, they would also persecute the believers, as wolves catching and scattering the sheep.

The wolves, would not openly appear to be ravenous beasts. Rather, they wear sheep's clothing:

“beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Mat. 7:15).

The preeminent false prophet (cp. Rev. 16:13) is the Pope in all his pomp and glory – and his office is a perpetuation of the Roman persecutory power of old. In our day, and in our circumstance in the western world, we do not suffer violent persecution at his hand, but being attired with a sheep's fleece, his methods are more insidious and subtill. By peace he shall destroy many and will so prevail against the saints until the appearance of the Great Shepherd, who shall deliver his sheep and destroy the wolf.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the defender and protector of the flock, and he will deliver them – even if they have had to suffer persecution first at the hands of the great apostasy. But those who ought to have been watching over the flock proved themselves to be but hirelings – being motivated by self-interest, rather than concern for the sheep. So Ezekiel described:

“Woe to *the shepherds of Israel* that do feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? *Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but* ye feed not the flock. ... my sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: Yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them” (Eze. 34:2-4, 6 – see whole chapter).

Here is the irony: those who ought to have cared for the flock instead fleeced and fed off them. The wolves would persecute the faithful believers in Christ, but as hirelings, the leaders fled from before them. The Lord Jesus Christ was also put to death by the wolves – yet in laying down his life at their hands, he gave his life for the sheep. He submitted to them, as he said concerning his life:

“No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. The commandment have I received of my Father” (Jno. 10:18).

In our day, we do not have Spirit-appointed elders, or shepherds – the situation is very different. The Lord Jesus Christ is our only shepherd. Also, we do not suffer violent persecution as did the believers in previous ages at the hands of spiritual wolves. We do, however, have a need to earnestly contend for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints (Jude 3). The great Apostasy is working against those who would become wise unto salvation through faith in the true Gospel, and so we need to take great care to ensure that we maintain our separation from the world of darkness.

There is great comfort in the fact that Messiah will deliver us:

“my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, *neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand*” (Jno. 10:27-28).

Whatever happens to us in this life, there is nothing – not even death itself – that can separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35), IF we remain faithful to the One who laid down his life for his friends. Jesus Christ is the Great Shepherd, and we long to hear his welcome voice, inviting us to partake of the glory of the age to come. As he also said in our reading: “I am the Door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture” (Jno. 10:9). We therefore desire to enter in, to be saved from the wolves – and also the greatest enemy of all, even death itself.

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