

# 1. "I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD"

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"I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep ... 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" (John 10: 11, 1).

**The sheepfold**, or sheep pen, was a common feature in the towns and villages of Jesus' day. The pen was about 3 metres high (usually made of rock and stones) without a roof, but had a solid door. At the end of the day's grazing, each shepherd would bring his little flock of goats and/or sheep into this communal holding pen.

The shepherds would retire for the night to their own homes, and a door-keeper or **porter** would guard the flocks in this one safe pen. He would guard the door all night because there were wild animals in those pastoral districts. And of course, unscrupulous thieves too.

In the morning, the door-keeper would admit each of the recognized shepherds through the one door so they could lead their respective flocks out for pasturing. Each shepherd would call his own sheep out by their individual names ... "White ear!", "Spotty!", "Stumpy", etc., and the sheep knew their names and they knew the voice of their own shepherd. Shepherd and sheep shared direct and intimate knowledge of each other as they went out through the door for the day.

This is the familiar picture Jesus uses in his **parable** (or **figure of speech {v. 6}**) when he describes himself as **the good Shepherd**.

## AN UNFORTUNATE CHAPTER-BREAK

It's such a pity there is a break between chapters nine and ten. This artificial break interrupts the natural flow of John's pen, because Jesus is continuing his public stoush with the religious authorities who have just evicted from the Temple the man whom he had healed of his blindness.

According to the religious authorities this Sabbath-healing proved Jesus had broken the Law and so, in their judgment, Jesus could not possibly be God's Messiah. In fact, they estimated this Sabbath-healing proved Jesus was **a sinner... but others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them** (John 9:16).

These authorities will now get to the bottom of this controversy. They call the healed man, and also his parents, to testify; **"Give glory to God"** they piously insist, **"we know that this man is a sinner"** (9: 24). Fearful of being excommunicated from the Temple and from their community, the man's parents dodged the bullet by telling the Pharisees, **"Yes, this is our son who was born blind, but how he came to see, we don't know ... Ask him; he is of age, he shall speak for himself"** (9: 21).

The healed man then continues, **"Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see."** But the authorities' ears are shut for, **the Jews had already agreed, that if any one should confess [Jesus] to be the Messiah, he should be put out of the synagogue** (9:22).

Against such hostility and in spite of their threat to excommunicate him from their "religious club" the blind man says to them, **"Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where he is from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not hear sinners; but if any one is God-fearing, and**

does His will, He hears him. Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind" (9: 30-32).

The authorities then drive the man out of the Temple precincts. The Greek word is that strong. They **cast him out** (9:34). Upon hearing this, Jesus *actively searched* for the man, and **finding him**, asks him if he believes in **the Son of Man** (i.e. in the Christ/Messiah). The man confesses, "**Lord, I believe.**" **And he** bowed before Jesus, and offered him homage (9:38).

**Chapter 9** ends with Jesus accusing those leaders of the people of being wilfully blind to His Messianic credentials. Refusing to face the facts, the chapter ends with Jesus telling them, "**Your sin remains**" (9: 41).

**John 10** continues the conversation ... "**Amen, Amen**" ("Very truly"). When Jesus says "**Amen, Amen**" in the Gospel of John he is always continuing a subject. "Amen, Amen", never starts a new conversation. That's another reason why there should be no chapter break here. <sup>1</sup>

Jesus is going on to explain to the Jewish leaders --- via the parable of the Good Shepherd --- who it is who really has the power and authority to give access to God --- who really is the Door to God's life!

Don't miss this contrast. In chapter **9 verse 34** the Pharisees **cast out** the healed man from the Temple. In chapter **10 verse 3** Jesus, the good Shepherd **leads out** to abundant pastures! The graphic contrast is the difference between a violent eviction, and a gentle leading!

So, the parable of the good Shepherd addresses the question: Who has the authority to determine who comes in and who goes out into God's pasture? Who has the right to determine who belongs to God's flock? Who has God's backing, God's *imprimatur* to open and to close? Who are the legitimate shepherds? These pious Pharisees or Jesus, God's Messiah? That's the issue at stake. That's the immediate context.

## OLD TESTAMENT CONTEXT

But there is also a broader context. The Good Shepherd parable must always be read with **EZEKIEL 34** in mind, for **EZEKIEL 34 ...** teaches that God Himself is the Shepherd of Israel and that God will judge the evil shepherds who are troubling His people.

One has only to read **Ezekiel 34** to realise the whole chapter is a polemic against bad shepherds who are abusing God's people. The prophet Ezekiel is commanded to **prophesy against the shepherds of Israel** (Ex. 34: 2).

Various "**woes**" are pronounced over these bad leaders who should have been pastoring God's people. Instead, these false shepherds were not only neglecting, but indeed wounding, even killing God's flock. The LORD God says, "**I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand** (v. 10).

I counted up twelve times in the chapter where God calls His people "**My flock**", and twice more when He calls them "**the flock**". There are another two times when God calls them "**My sheep**", and once, "**My people**". Oh, how dear, how precious, to God's heart are His people! They are "**My flock**", "**the flock**", "**My sheep**", "**My people**". <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This principle is demonstrated just a couple of verses further down. See v. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, he also talks about "**My Servant David**" *twice*, and "**My pasture**" and "**My hill**".

Then, the LORD God goes on to declare exactly how He will remedy this tragic state of affairs. Although His flock is **scattered for lack of a [good] shepherd (v. 5)**, God is going to appoint His very own special shepherd. This good shepherd will perfectly represent the heart of the LORD his God.

**Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. And I will make a covenant of peace with them and eliminate harmful beasts from the land ... Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are My people," declares the LORD God ... (Ez. 34:23f).**

So, in contrast to the evil shepherds who abuse God's flock and who **seek their own good rather than the good of the flock**, God promises to send **My servant David** to be their 'good Shepherd'. The good Shepherd of God's election will be established in a **covenant of peace**. When this authorised, *bone fide* son of David arrives, Israel will know that God Himself has not abandoned His people. They really are His sheep because of His covenant-keeping faithfulness.

Now, back to our story in **John 10** where the religious leaders have just **cast out** of the Temple the healed man, and where the Pharisees have just called Jesus a rejected sinner. These religious leaders had set themselves up as official "doorkeepers" of Israel's "orthodoxy". They are the "porters" of "the Creed"! And anybody who doesn't keep to their doctrine --- the way they determine God must operate, is **cast out (9: 34)**.

*But Jesus rejects them!* He says, **"Amen, amen, I say to you ... (John 10:1)**. The **you** refers to the Pharisees and the authorities who had just thrown the blind man out.

**"Amen, amen, 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. But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. When he puts forth all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. And a stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10: 1-5).**

John goes on to explain that this was a **figure of speech** which the blind religious leaders **did not understand (v. 6)**. Their sin really has blinded them!

So then, what is **the sheepfold**? What does the sheep pen in the parable represent? Or, does it represent anything in particular? Some commentators have suggested the sheep pen is Heaven, because that's the place where thieves and robbers and beasts cannot attack. But how can that be, since Jesus is not taking his sheep out of heaven! Other commentators have suggested the pen is the apostate Church. But that is very anachronistic, and does not fit the First Century Jewish context.

It ought to be plain to see that the sheep pen in this setting is the **Judaism** as represented by the blind Pharisees who were rejecting Jesus' obvious Messianic credentials. They should have recognised Jesus standing there in fulfillment of God's new covenant promise to send them the **one good shepherd, the Son of David (Ez. 34)?**

## **HOW THE GOOD SHEPHERD OF ISRAEL IS RECOGNISED**

Jesus gives at least three characteristics by which we can determine who is a legitimate shepherd:-

1. **He enters the sheepfold by "the door"...** **He who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep.** Only robbers and thugs try to climb up over the walls, creeping in some other way.

In order to qualify as the good Shepherd, Jesus himself had to go through the door into the sheepfold. Jesus had to come in fulfillment of their own Scriptures. The Messiah must come in broad daylight, down the middle of the road which the prophets had already marked out for him. He must be **“the son of David”** the human-being descended from the biological chain mapped out by the spirit of prophecy.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, **“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”** (Mk. 1: 2-3). John the Baptist heralded Messiah’s arrival in accordance with the Scriptures --- Jesus, the legitimate Shepherd entered by the door of God’s sheepfold.

2. **The doorkeeper opens the door for him... To him the porter opens.** The doorkeeper recognises the true shepherd. The works that Jesus was performing proved that God had sent him. If God was not with him, Jesus could not have done a single miraculous “sign”. Of course, in context, and most recently, the blind man now seeing in their very midst was clear proof that God was with and in Christ Jesus, backing him up, opening the door.

The wilfully stubborn Jews said, **“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly”**. Jesus responds, **“I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in my Father’s Name, these bear witness of me ... If I do not the works of my Father, do not believe me** (John 10: 24-25, 37).

The united testimony of the NT is that Jesus performed his miraculous signs, not because he was “God”, but because God was with him, because God mightily anointed him, because God’s power had free flow through him. Jesus’ works proved God opened the door to His flock by His accredited **servant of David**;

**Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through him in your midst, just as you yourselves know ---** (Acts 2: 22).

3. **His intimate care of the sheep... the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. When he puts forth all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.** He calls his own sheep **by name**. And God’s sheep recognise and respond to his voice. Certainly the healed man in their midst had heard. For when Jesus asked him, **“Do you believe in the Son of man?”** The blind man confessed, **“I believe”** (John 9: 35, 38).

Jesus was ever seeking and calling his own. Wherever he went his sheep heard when he called them by name: **“Zaccheus, make haste and come down; for today I must stay at your house”** (Lk. 19: 5)!

**“And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man named Levi** (we know him as Matthew), **sitting at the receipt of custom: and Jesus said to him, “Follow me’.** And he arose, and followed him (Matt. 9:9).

Mary Magdalene is weeping outside the tomb. She thinks the man standing there is the gardner. **“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”** the man asks. She wails, **“Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”** The resurrected Jesus says, **“Mary”** and immediately she recognised the sweet voice of Jesus (John 20: 15-16)!

Oh, there is a response in our hearts whenever Jesus calls us, is there not? Every sheep of Christ’s who has heard the master’s voice, responds with joy, **“Lord Jesus, I hear your voice! I hear you calling my name! I come! Lord, I come! I come into the arms of my loving good Shepherd!”** What grace! What tender care our Lord Jesus gives us! Thank you, O our Father, for giving us ears to hear your Son!

**THE HIRED HAND.** Jesus goes on to describe the character of the false shepherds. They only come for self-aggrandisement and self-seeking,

The thief comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy; I am come that they might have life, and might have it abundantly. I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (vs. 10-11). But in contrast, The hireling (the hired hand) ... beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters them (v. 12).

Here Jesus gives us a general principle in life. The crisis reveals the character. The wolf reveals the true heart of the hired hand. You might never know this was a hired hand unless the wolf had come.

### TODAY'S APPLICATION --- SEVEN QUALITIES OF A GOOD PASTOR

The urgent need for God's people in this dark day is that He raise up good under-shepherds who will pastor His flock with due care. Although our Lord is the good Shepherd over God's **one flock**, the NT makes it abundantly clear that the church has many under-shepherds, that is, pastors and teachers.

When he lists the various gifted ministries which the ascended Lord Jesus has set in his church for the **equipping and building up of the body of Christ**, the apostle Paul says **pastors and teachers** are given so that **we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4: 11f).**

When we consider the qualities our good Shepherd exemplifies in **John chapter ten**, we are to know that his under-pastors are to model those same characteristics as they pastor his sheep. What are these qualities?

**First, a true pastor gains access to the sheep by God's appointment.** "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" (10:1).

There are to be no self-appointed pastors and teachers in the church! The Pharisees intruded and set themselves up as spokesmen for God. They were not listening to God's appointed Shepherd.

But one must only take this ministry up when the call of God is clearly laid upon their hearts. So, how does a young person determine whether or not God has called them, is calling them to be a pastor?

Here is my considered belief: If you can do any other job, if you can work in any other occupation and find there is no divine restlessness in your soul, then the full-time, and paid-ministry is not your calling. You have to have the anointing of God upon your soul! You have to get to the place where you can do nothing else, God helping you. As the apostle said, "**The love of Christ constrains us**" (2 Cor. 5: 14). Our hearts are compelled, yes, held hostage, taken us into His custody. We are in a state of urgency about Christ's Gospel, driven, hard pressed by Christ's love for the sheep.

**Second, a true pastor carries the welfare of the sheep in his heart.** Writing to the Hebrew Christians, the pastor says of their over-shepherds, **they watch over your souls (Heb. 13: 17).** A true pastor will constantly pray for the sheep under his/her care.

When he wanted to hear some news from the Philippian Church, Paul hoped to send Timothy. Paul complained, "**I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:19-21).**" Evidently, it's always been a challenge to find a good pastor who carries the welfare of Christ's flock in his heart!

**Third, a true pastor finds an "open" door.** "**To him the door-keeper opens**" (10: 3). Which is to say, there will be a door of opportunity to exercise the gifts the Spirit of God gives. Indeed, the true



shepherd will be opposed (that's a promise!), even as his Lord was, yet the door for service will miraculously remain open until God's appointed work is done. Men may try their hardest to shut down the ministry of a holy Spirit empowered ministry, but just as for the Master, God's mighty power will operate against all odds to keep an open door for service.

**Fourth, a true pastor will be recognized by God's true sheep. And a stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they know not the voice of strangers (10: 5).** The sheep also carry a responsibility in determining who their pastor is.

**MOTHER JONES.** It is recorded that at the **Azusa Street** services in the early days of the Pentecostal Movement in the early 1900's that,

The services were so anointed that if anyone got up to speak from their intellectual understanding, the Spirit-filled believers would break out in wailing sobs. This has been illustrated well in a story about a woman called Mother Jones. One man arose to speak, apparently not being led by the Spirit. As he stood and preached, Mother Jones is said to have quietly hurried up to the platform, where she sat at the foot of the pulpit, then stared up at the fellow with icy, foreboding eyes. Finally she said, "Can't you see that you aren't anointed to preach?"

Because of this incident, Mother Jones quickly earned a reputation that discouraged any unanointed preacher from standing at the pulpit. It is said that all she had to do was stand up, and the unanointed preacher would run from the pulpit!" <sup>3</sup>

Yes, it takes anointed sheep who are in tune with the voice of their Master to ensure we get anointed, Spirit-filled, Christ-centred pastors in the pulpit! The sheep have their part to play.

**Fifth, the true pastor knows his sheep. He calls his own sheep by name (v. 3).** A true shepherd takes the time to know the folk under his care and protection. He spends time getting to know their individual needs and concerns.

One trend I have noticed in the last decade or two is how few pastors actually *visit* their flock. How few there are who invest quality time with their parishioners. It's common to hear, "I have been going to that church for X-number of months, years, and the pastor still doesn't know my name." Sad.

**Sixth, a true pastor leads by example. He leads them out (v. 3).** By his diligent study and devotion to the holy Scriptures, the good pastor is able to lead his flock into the green pastures of the mighty saving truths of the word of God.

He applies himself like a good workman who does not need to be ashamed; Paul encouraged young pastor Timothy, **Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).**

**Seventh, a true pastor goes in front. He goes before them (v. 4).** God's shepherds do not push and shove and drive the sheep from behind. No. The apostle Paul said, **"Imitate me. Follow me as I follow Christ"**. He said, **"What you see in me, do."** Ah, there is nothing quite so compelling as a man or as a woman who is following Christ leading from the front! Follow me, he says.

**JACOB:** This principle is beautifully illustrated in the life of Jacob. After being reconciled, his brother Esau invites Jacob to ride up front together on their journey home. Together they will ride on ahead into the distance. But Jacob, with a true pastor's heart replies, **My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one**

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<sup>3</sup> Roberts Liardon, *God's Generals: Why they Succeeded and Why Some Failed*, Albury Publishing, Oklahoma, 9th Printing, 1996, pp 149-150.

day, all the flocks will die. Please let my lord pass on before his servant; and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir” (Gen. 33: 13-14).

**Eighth, a true shepherd lays his life down for the sheep.** This is, of course, the supreme qualification. “I am the good Shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep” (v. 11).

**THE BISHOP OF BAGHDAD ... CANON ANDREW PAUL BARTHOLEMW WHITE** (b. 1964) presided over the only Anglican Church Parish in Iraq both before and during the days of the so-called ISIS Caliphate. He has suffered with Multiple Sclerosis for 17 years, is married with children.

The Bishop of Baghdad invited ISIS to dinner at the peak of their reign of terror. They said, “Yes, we’ll come, but we’ll chop your head off.” **White** said (in a classic bit of British understatement), “Rather kind of them to warn me.”

He did not want to leave his parishioners, many of whom had already been slaughtered by Isis --- by beheading, some by crucifixion. Most of his parishioners had fled for their own safety. And the few remaining parishioners begged him to leave for his own safety. He said, “I am your pastor. I will not close this church until the last of my flock is dead and gone!” But in 2014 his superior the Archbishop of Canterbury ordered him back to England for his own safety.

Now, that is a pastor! That is a good shepherd with the heart of Jesus himself. May God our Father raise up for His church in these last days ---

Pastors with such a tender shepherd heart.

Pastors who will not flee when the wolf comes.

Pastors who know their own sheep because they have invested their lives in the care of their people.

Pastors who are skilled in the Scriptures, anointed of God, able to rightly explain the truths of the Gospel of Christ.

Pastors who will lay down their lives unto the death for their flock.

A good Shepherd always lays down his/her life for the sheep of God’s flock. No more hired hands need apply!

“I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11).