

John 10:1-21

This week we come to one of the best-loved passages in the Gospel of John, the Good Shepherd passage. One of the problems with familiar passages is that, while we know something of the text, what we know we know can blind us from seeing what else is there. For example, did you know that the “Good Shepherd” passage was spoken to the Pharisees and not to the disciples?

Let’s get to it...

10:1

Notice how there is no distinction in the text between 9:41 and 10:1. For some reason, the people who broke John up into chapters decided to place a chapter break between 9:41 and 10:1. But here’s how John wrote it: “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door...”

Jesus speaks of a number of things here:

- Sheepfold
- Door
- Another way into the sheepfold
- Thief and robber

As of right now, we don’t know what either of those things corresponds to. But we will...

10:2

Now we have a shepherd being contrasted to thieves and robbers.

And here’s when people like to take all they know about shepherds from 1st Century Palestine and make a spiritual application to Jesus. But we’ll see shortly at what points Jesus wants to be compared to a shepherd.

10:3

Jesus gives us a tutorial on what shepherds do. They lead sheep out. It appears that Jesus is constructing a rather large illustrative (or figurative) framework from which he will teach the Pharisees. He’s still setting the stage at this point. Best not to draw conclusions at this point.

10:4

In addition to “leading them out,” the shepherd “goes ahead of them.” (And at this point, I really, really want to tell you what this means! (You probably already know what it means, but it’s exciting stuff...)) And the sheep follow the shepherd.

10:5

This verse tells us that the sheep can only belong to one “shepherd,” there is only one they can follow. (More on this later on too.)

10:6

...so it's OK if you don't understand what he's saying at this point either. Jesus will explain...

10:7

Jesus identifies with one of the elements of the extended metaphor he gave to the Pharisees. Don't get lost here; Jesus will tell us what this means in a minute. It's what he's about to say in verse 8 that is important. Remember back in verses 1-2; Jesus mentioned a door right before he mentioned thieves and robbers... which is what he will talk about in verse 8.

10:8

The question is: who came before Jesus? The Jews? Yes. The Pharisees? Yes. Caesar? Yes. ALL! If you have to ask, Jesus says that they are thieves and robbers. But the point here is not to speak about the evils of those who are not Jesus, but rather to highlight the allegiance of the sheep to the shepherd. The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd and the voice of the shepherd alone.

Jesus might be saying this because the “elites” were wondering why Jesus still had people following him when the “conventional wisdom” wanted to have nothing to do with him. More to the point, why would the man-born-blind still follow Jesus after being questioned by the Pharisees and being excommunicated by the Jews? Because he can only hear the voice of the shepherd. Try as they might, the Pharisees and Jews will not be able to turn him or any of the sheep back to themselves.

10:9

But back to the door. Jesus is the door. He is the means by which people “go in and out and find pasture.” But instead of getting bogged-down in the details, let's go big-picture and see the promise given here: “will be saved.” “Being saved” here is described as “finding pasture.” Begg the question: what's a pasture?

10:10

The difference between Jesus and all the rest is highlighted here.

Some say there's really no difference between Jesus, Muhammad, etc, etc... that all religions pretty much say the same thing and all point people in the same direction. Jesus says that this is not the case. All others lead to death, only he leads to life. This puts the reader in a difficult position as he or she reads Jesus' words. Either Jesus is right and he or she needs to abandon all except Jesus; or Jesus is a delusional worker of miracles, a dangerous man able to influence vulnerable people. This verse makes it impossible to see Jesus as a novelty or as something of moderate importance.

10:11

Not only is Jesus the door, he is also the shepherd. He is the one the sheep follow. More than that, he is the one who leads the sheep. This takes us back to what Jesus said in

10:4, about bringing the sheep out and having them follow him. The question is: from where and to where is Jesus leading the sheep?

Answer: from life to death. Both in this life and also through death, Christ goes before us. He has already brought us out of darkness into light, death to life. And he has gone before us in death, only to be raised to a life that cannot end. And we, too, will follow him in this way. (See also Romans 6.) Where Jesus goes, we will go.

Jesus directs us to think this way about his being the shepherd and our following him when he speaks of laying his life down for the sheep. He will do this both to keep them safe, and so that they will follow him in death to resurrection.

This is important, powerful stuff!

10:12-13

The question then becomes, what will happen to those who follow not-Jesus?

Again, Jesus jumps back into the metaphorical, introducing us to another “character”: the wolf. I’ve heard people say that the wolf is something like the trials and temptations of life, and that without Jesus, you cannot overcome them. But this is silly. Non-believers make it through life fine with great frequency, and it is the teaching of Scripture that a believer’s life in Christ will actually be a cross-carrying difficult race! Being a Christian does not make life easier; it makes it harder. This is why Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15: “if for this life only we have hope in Christ we are, of all people, the most to be pitied.”

I’ll cut to the chase. The “wolf” is death.

All the philosophies and “world views” and teachers and so on and so on can sound good and appear to be a shepherd, someone or something that cares for those under its care. But when faced with the enemy of death, none can overcome.

Inasmuch as this is a text about the ability of Jesus to take us out of the sheep pen of this age and into the pasture of the age to come, it also speaks to the nature of all other people and systems of belief that masquerade as our true shepherd. Money, politicians, other sources of alleged “truth,” friends, family, governments, those in authority, doctors... when it comes to being able to (or wanting to) protect us against our natural enemy, the wolf (that is, death), they are all worthless. With that in mind, allegiance to Christ is the only reasonable conclusion.

10:14

Remember, this is spoken in an answer to a question the Pharisees asked back in chapter 9: “Are we also blind?” (As opposed to the man whose eyes Jesus had opened, who professed Jesus to be “Lord” and worshiped him.)

Jesus is standing up for the man who was born blind. He has heard the voice of his shepherd and he has begun to follow his shepherd through the gate and will follow him into open pasture.

In saying this, Jesus can also be saying that, because the Pharisees do not hear his voice, they are not his sheep. The reality of salvation implies the existence of judgment.

10:15

The question this verse begs be asked is: how does the Father know Jesus?

The context will not allow us to say a lot about how much or in what way the Father knows Jesus, what is noteworthy here is that Jesus is saying to the Pharisees what he said

to the Jews in chapter 8: to see him is the see the Father; he and the Father are one. Jesus is repeating what he has said before to a different group of people; his testimony remains the same.

10:16

For those of us reading this text many centuries later, we know it to be true. Christ has called us, brought us through the gate of himself and is in the process of seeing us safely from this pen to the pasture of the life of the age to come. To get there from here, we will follow the path of our Savior: suffering, dying, and being raised.

Notice that at a time in the future, there will only be one flock. All of the robbers and thieves will be gone. We look forward to that day when there will be no one to tempt us to leave our shepherd, abandon us when facing the terrors of death, and be unable to deliver us into the coming age.

10:17

Jesus mentions laying his life down for the second time in this passage. He is clearly teaching that the laying-down of his life is consistent with his work as the good shepherd. There is no good reason for a shepherd to lay down his life for sheep. Defend them? Yes! Die for them? Why? This highlights the radical nature of what Jesus did for us. There is no answer to the question: WHY, other than love.

10:18

Jesus was not asked to die for us “or else.” He willingly and freely gave his life for us. Greater love has no one than this.

And this is not a person sacrificing for another person. This is a shepherd dying for sheep. This is God dying for his creation that strayed! The hymn “The Lamb” says it well: “How great is this great paradox to ponder; the shepherd dies for sheep that love to wander.”

10:19-21

Notice that we do not get the response from the Pharisees to what Jesus says. The Jews, however, are there to render their opinion. Notice how they have progressed: from all of them wanting to kill Jesus to at least some of them being unable to make sense of the fact that he was able to perform the miracle of chapter 9. It appears that, in view of the healing of the man born blind, even some of Jesus’ staunchest enemies are having second thoughts.