

John 57 – I AM the Good Shepherd

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Scripture 1: (Jn. 10:1-21 ESV)

"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. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."

This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 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."

There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, "He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?"

Others said, "These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

Scripture 2: (Ezek. 34:1-35:1 ESV)

The word of the LORD came to me:

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No

longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

"For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. 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. I will feed them in justice.

"As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

"Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

"I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land. And they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them. They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid. And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord GOD. And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord GOD."

Sermon:

The Gospel of John, chapter 10, is one of the most well known and well beloved passages in the New Testament and it is often paired with Psalm 23, the “Shepherd's Psalm”. When they are expounded together, we receive a very comforting message of Christ's providential care and love for His chosen people. Yet, although that psalm has an appropriate connection to Jesus' declaration, “*I am the good shepherd.*”, it was not the primary intention of this parable. Understanding Jesus as our God and Shepherd, may rightly be drawn from this passage, but that is a secondary point within John's narrative. That interpretation is more of a natural consequence than the intended purpose of the evangelist.

Meanwhile, the contextual unity between John 9 and the whole of John 10 is rarely emphasized, leading us to quickly forget that these three incidents: Jesus granting of sight to the man born blind, Jesus's declaration of “*I am the door.*”, and Jesus's declaration of “*I am the good shepherd.*”; are closely linked, not merely by literary proximity but also as a narrative whole. Each one may stand alone and teach us something specific about Jesus as the Son of God, but when they are considered together they better become supporting evidence for Jesus's claims. The initial miracle confirms both His message and the messenger.

We have already seen that whenever Jesus proclaims “*ego eimi...*” in John's Gospel, He makes a dual claim, He:

- identifies Himself with and as the LORD God, through His invocation of the Divine Name of “I AM” (Exodus 3:14); and,
- describes and proclaims some aspect of the LORD's character by way of analogy, such as: the bread of life” (John 6:35), the “light of the world” (John 8:12, 9:5).

So, at the beginning of this chapter, when He said “*I am the door.*”, Jesus again asserted His divinity and He also claimed the role of mediator between the LORD and His chosen people. However, the particular type of mediator is subject to multiple correct interpretations.

- The simplest type of mediator would be that of a teacher of God's Law, a Rabbi like many of the wiser Pharisees, and as someone who explains and proclaims God's Word to His people as a prophet.
- The next type of mediator would be as an elder, like the members of the Sanhedrin who made judgments and decisions concerning justice, ruling with authority like a king.
- The third type of mediator would be that of a priest, offering atonement for sin and interceding with God for the benefit of God's people.
- Yet the fourth and final type of mediator was exceptionally rare in redemptive history, that of covenant mediator. This role was limited to only a few other righteous individuals across Israel's history, men like: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. But, these mediators did not negotiate their respective covenant's with the LORD, as a vassal-king might have been able to do with his new Suzerain and Overlord, they merely received them on behalf of all those whom they represented.

Jesus, as “*the door*”, emphasized the gracious sovereignty of God through the establishment of His covenants with the Elect. But Jesus, as the God-man and covenant mediator: the *Logos* who is *Theos* and *Andros*; set the terms of the covenant as God and, He received the covenant for us as a man: as the second and last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45).

When Jesus continued to explain His parable, He built upon the metaphorical imagery of the door by declaring, “*I am the good shepherd.*”. Yet asserting Himself as both “*the door*” and as “*the good shepherd*” was not a matter of either/or, but both/and. Remember, the door of the sheepfold, the gatekeeper, was a shepherd tending one of the flocks within the corral, whether or not that flock belonged to him. Wealthy shepherds with large

flocks were commonly known to employ “under-shepherds” to help care for their sheep. These under-shepherds may have been their sons (Genesis 37:2) and daughters (Exodus 2:16), their household servants (Genesis 13:5-7), or simply “hired hands”. Regardless, they would each do the work of a shepherd.

While Jesus's audience would have naturally associated “the shepherd” with the LORD and “the sheep” with Israel and the Jewish people, Jesus's second “I AM” assertion would have been understood as a reasonable clarification concerning the quality of the gatekeeper. What they would have immediately understood is that, if Jesus is the “good shepherd” and gatekeeper, then the others were “bad shepherds” and gatekeepers.

It is relevant to note that, of the seven commonly recognized “I AM” statements of Jesus, “*I am the good shepherd.*” is the only one that incorporates an obvious moral element. Each of the others include an enhancing descriptor explaining something about the personal character of God and Jesus, but they are all morally neutral:

- “*I am the bread of life.*” (6:35), defines Jesus as God the provider.
- “*I am the light of the world.*” (8:12), defines Jesus as God the illuminator: the giver of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.
 - “*Before Abraham was, I am.*” (5:58), defines Jesus as God the eternal and ageless.
- “*I am the door.*” (10:7), defines Jesus as the unique and sole means of access to God, as God the revelator.
- “*I am the good shepherd.*” (10:11), defines how well Jesus cares for His people, as God their shepherd, expressing His moral goodness and loving care for His flock.
- “*I am the resurrection and the life.*” (11:25), defines Jesus, as God, as the original source of all life and the source of restored and renewed life.
- “*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*” (14:6), defines Jesus as the sole means of access to God, as the source of life, and asserts His teaching and Himself as being the inerrant and infallible Word of God.
- “*I am the true vine.*” (15:1), defines Jesus as the “true Israel”, expressing the union between Israel (and thus the Church) with Christ and the provisional care of the LORD.

Together, these seven statements form a descriptive chiasm, with the last three mirroring the characteristics of the first three and with this central statement of “*I am the good shepherd.*” explicitly describes God as good and loving. So, this narrative chiasm implicitly applies these moral qualities to all of God's attributes described by these statements. Therefore, God is the “good bread”, the “good light”, the “good door”, the “good resurrection and life”, the “good way, good truth, good life”, and the “good true vine”.

Using the shepherd's actions, Jesus highlights the single characteristic distinguishing good shepherds from bad:

- The good shepherd “*lays down his life for the sheep*”, while bad shepherds see “*the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees*”.
- The good shepherd, since he owns and cares for the sheep, protects and defends them at all cost, while a bad shepherd will flee “*because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep*”.

That quality and characteristic is love. The good shepherd loves, protects, and defends their sheep while the bad shepherds, who do not care for or love their sheep, will therefore abandon them at the first sign of danger and risk to themselves.

When interpreting the Gospels, and especially this passage, Christians have been taught and trained to immediately characterize the Pharisees as bad shepherds. We use it to justify condemning them for their self-

righteousness and their selfishness, as failing in their spiritual obligation as the “teachers of Israel” (John 3:10). We also use it to condemn all modern forms of what we commonly call “Pharisee-ism”, a strict legalistic application that is more concerned with following the “letter of the law” (as religious observation; “Rules As Written”) than preserving the “spirit of the law” (as living righteously and faithfully; “Rules As Intended”). Doing this, we risk throwing out the good aspects of the Pharisees, especially their concern for personal holiness and godly living. We too easily forget that the Pharisees were commendable regarding their concern for personal righteousness and holiness; their fervent desire to please the LORD (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13:289); their inclination towards showing mercy in the exercise of judgment (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13:294); their affirmation that the LORD ordains everything that comes to pass, while humanity retains and exercises their own freedom of will, so that God's will naturally occurs (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18:13/WCF 3.1); their belief in the immortality of the soul, the expectation of judgment and punishment in the afterlife, and lastly, their belief in the resurrection of the righteous (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18:14/WCF 32+33). Those beliefs are not considered strange by professing Christians, especially Calvinists. Therefore, whenever Jesus or John or Paul or modern interpreters “condemn” the Pharisees, they are not condemning all of the Pharisees or everything that they believed, but instead are condemning only the particular individuals, practices, activities and attitudes specifically being referenced in Scripture (Mark 7:3-13; Luke 18:10-14) at that moment.

Here, in John's narrative, to better understand the contrast that Jesus was making between Himself (as the good shepherd) and the Jewish leaders (as bad shepherds), we need to turn back to the prophet Ezekiel to find a more clear explanation (WCF 1.9). Ezekiel was a Levitical priest, taken by Nebuchadnezzar from Jerusalem to Babylon (Ezekiel 1:1-3). He received several prophetic visions from the LORD, and his ministry among the Babylonian exiles was contemporaneous with the political influence of Daniel/Belteshazzar. We know that a significant part of the exile's cause was Judea's idolatry, the pagan pluralism occurring in the LORD's Temple (Ezekiel 8), that was being led by their religious leaders. Thus, “the Word of the LORD” came to Ezekiel, telling him to, “...*prophesy against the shepherds of Israel...*” and distinguish the bad shepherds from the good.

Ezekiel begins by accusing these bad spiritual shepherds, listing the LORD's many charges against them. He accused them of feeding themselves, of exploiting the sheep, instead of responsibly taking care of them. He accused them of eating the “fatty portions”, clothing themselves with their wool, slaughtering and eating them, and thus ruling over God's people with harshness. These spiritual bad shepherds did not strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back those who have strayed, or seek the lost. Therefore, as the result of their mismanagement, the LORD's metaphorical sheep “...*were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.*”.

Consequently, God declared, “*Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.*”. The LORD set Himself against the shepherds of Israel because they had made it necessary for Him to need to rescue His sheep from their wicked depredations.

Therefore, the LORD established Himself as the good shepherd, in contrast to the bad shepherds. “*For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. **I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,** and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. 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. I will feed them in justice.”. God declared that He would do what every good shepherd should and would do, and all these things were what Jesus was doing throughout His whole ministry.

When Jesus invoked the Divine Name and proclaimed, “*I am the good shepherd.*”, among the layers of meaning, He meant “The LORD is the good Shepherd.”, leaning upon Ezekiel's prophecy. But, He also meant it in the plain sense of, “I am the good shepherd”, because He was doing the godly work of a good shepherd.

Then, the LORD continued, “*And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.*”, promising the return of Davidic kingship to Israel. God was promising that this Davidic king would be the LORD's appointed shepherd and that he would faithfully preserve God's flock. We observe here, in the LORD's prophetic establishment of this one shepherd coupled with, “*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep...*”, an early hint of Him prophesying the **necessary fact** of the God-man as Messiah: *Theos* and *Andros*. This son of David would be the Son of Man and Son of God.

When Jesus declared, “*I am the good shepherd.*”, it was shocking and concerning to His audience. Certainly, from their spiritually dark perspective, it was very close to crossing the line into blasphemy; however, it could still be interpreted as Jesus merely saying that He was a teacher, rivaling the Pharisees. But, what evidence had John recorded supporting Jesus' claim of being the divine “good shepherd” prophesied by Ezekiel?

When the LORD declared through Ezekiel that, “*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep...*”, He listed several things that He would do:

- “*I will seek the lost*”: Jesus sought the lost children of Israel when He spoke with the Samaritan woman and the people of Sychar (ancient Shechem) (John 4:1-42).
- “*I will bring back the strayed*”: Jesus corrected and rebuked those who were permitting the exploitative sale of sacrifices and money exchanges when He “cleansed” them from the Temple during the Passover season (John 2:13-17).
- “*I will bind up the injured*”: Jesus healed a Jewish man at Bethesda, who had been an invalid for thirty eight years (John 5:1-13), and Jesus would soon heal Malchus, a servant of the high priest, after Peter cut his ear off (John 18:10; Luke 22:50-51).
- “*I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy*”: Jesus' disciples were simple, ordinary people (John 1:35-51): people without much power or authority; while His crowds of followers included people from every strata of society. While those who opposed Him, because they were often convicted and condemned by His teaching, were the powerful religious elite (the Pharisees and Sadducees). They often made themselves look foolish in comparison to Jesus and they found their authority being ignored as they increasingly became irrelevant (John 7:32-49).
- “*I will feed them in justice*”: Jesus gave a woman, accused of adultery, justice. He publicly vindicated her after her accusers dropped the charge against her (John 8:2-11).

Each of these examples demonstrated how Jesus was doing the work of a “good shepherd”. Together, they were making the case that Jesus is the LORD's chosen, Davidic shepherd. Together, they would have been prompting an increase of hope that Jesus is the one who would restore Israel. But for many of the Jews, if not for most, they remained blind to the truth because the temporal hope that was growing within them, should have been an eschatological hope. They were missing God's bigger picture.

They did hope in the promises that the LORD had made through Ezekiel, that “*As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from*

all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD.”. But, they misunderstood them. They hoped for a Davidic king who would restore Israel to national independence. They hoped for a Davidic king whose policies would generate prosperity and establish peace in the land. They hoped for a Davidic king who would encourage the Jews, scattered across the Roman Empire (the Diaspora), to return home to Israel. Unfortunately, they failed to understand that the LORD has a bigger and greater plan for them and for us.

But, we have the benefit of hindsight. We have the benefit of the whole New Testament. We have been told the “end of the story”. We have been told and have had explained to us, what Jesus came to achieve for us. We get to “look through the glass” a little less “darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). So, we may better understand these past prophecies, in light of their fulfillment, and use them to better inform our hope and expectations for Christ’s ultimate fulfillment.

It is because Jesus is the “good shepherd”: the LORD’s appointed Davidic shepherd and the LORD, Himself; that we believe that Christ will seek and find all of His sheep because of His great love for us. We believe that He will rescue us from all of the trials and troubles of this world, delivering us on the great and terrible day of His judgment (“*a day of clouds and thick darkness*”; Joel 2:1-2) from the punishment that we justly deserve for our sinfulness. He will gather us all together, from out of every nation (“*out from the peoples and gather them from the countries*”; Isaiah 66:20), and bring us to Himself and place us in His promised land (“*into their own land*”; Genesis 13:14-17, 17:8, Exodus 3:7-8). Then, after He has brought us into His Kingdom, in a restored Eden, He will provide for our every need (“*will feed them with good pasture*”; Genesis 22:14) and we will finally be at peace and be able to enjoy our Sabbath rest in the LORD (“*will make them lie down*”; Genesis 2:2-3, Exodus 33:14, 2 Samuel 7:11).

These are promises that the LORD has given for His chosen people, His beloved children of adoption. Those are what we hope for, as Christians. That is what we are trusting Jesus Christ will deliver for us, whenever we say that “I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.”. These are what we should remember and think about when we call Jesus our “good shepherd”. It is easy for us to forget that there is more to our salvation than just the forgiveness of our sins. Redeemed by Jesus Christ, we are gaining far more than we can imagine; certainly far more than our sin could ever have offered. Although we should never forget it, we should not dwell or meditate upon what God has saved us from. But rather, let us meditate instead upon His promises and then thank Him, praise Him, and glorify His Name for all that He gives us and for everything that we are receiving in love because of the finished work of Jesus, our shepherd. Let us each love Him, thank Him, and confess Him like our forebear in the faith, King David, did in the Twenty-Third Psalm.

AMEN

{Please join with me in using this Psalm as our confession of faith, whether from memory or from a nearby Bible. It is located on page 428 of the pew Bibles.} (*Ps. 23:1-6 ESV*)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.