

# “I Am the Good Shepherd”

## The Thirty-Third in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

*Texts: John 10:1-21; Jeremiah 23:1-8*

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Moses and Israel’s prophets foretold of a time when God would send a faithful shepherd to care for God’s people (his flock)—yet another blessing of the messianic age. In the person of Jesus, that shepherd has come to Israel. Ironically, the Pharisees see themselves as Israel’s shepherds. But Jesus sees them as faithless thieves and robbers who care little for God’s flock, and who think nothing of exploiting the flock as it suits them. It is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who will gather God’s flock to himself, lead them to green pastures, and protect them from all enemies. The Good Shepherd cares for his flock and he will lay down his life for his sheep, those who hear his voice and who follow their shepherd wherever he leads them.

In John 9, Jesus miraculously heals a man who had been blind from birth. This miracle—the sixth of seven miraculous signs in John’s Gospel—proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah. One of the main themes of messianic prophecy (especially that found in the Book of Isaiah), is that when the Messiah comes, he will restore sight to the blind. When the Pharisees learn that Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath, they were outraged by Jesus’ action and sought to use his miracle, and the manner in which he performed it (using mud and spittle), as grounds to find Jesus guilty of breaking the Sabbath. This would be sufficient to arrest Jesus and put him to death.

When the Pharisees could not prove that Jesus had done anything wrong, they angrily turn on the blind man who identified Jesus as the prophet. When the blind man refuses to change his story about how Jesus healed him, or change his opinion about Jesus’ identity, the Pharisees cast him and his parents out of the synagogue, solely on the ground that Jesus had healed him. Knowing what had happened to this man and his family, Jesus has compassion on him yet again, and brings him to saving faith (as recounted in verses 35-37). The blind man whose eyes are now open, confesses his faith in Jesus, and then worships him. Remarkably, Jesus receives his worship.

The ever-present Pharisees are watching this transpire and could not help but respond when Jesus places God’s covenant judgment (curse) upon them. In John 9:39-41, “*Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, ‘Are we also blind?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.’”* The Pharisees witnessed a man born blind from birth receiving sight, and yet offer not a word of praise to God. The miracle proves that Jesus is the Messiah, but they seek to kill him. Because the blind man will not change his story to help them trap Jesus, the Pharisees revile him, before excommunicating him. John leaves us with the amazing irony in chapter 9 is that a blind man can now see (spiritually and physically) while it is the Pharisees who are truly blind even though there is nothing wrong with their eyesight.

The actions of the unbelieving, heartless, and cruel Pharisees towards the blind man and his parents, coupled with the fact that Jesus places God’s covenant curse upon them (they remain in their sins), sets the stage for one of the most beloved sections in the New Testament, John 10:1-21, wherein Jesus proclaims that he is the Good Shepherd of Israel. In the prior chapter (John 9), the account of the healing of the blind man takes place against the backdrop of the messianic expectation of sight being restored to the blind. So too in chapter 10, Jesus discourse is set against the Old Testament backdrop of God placing

his covenant curse upon the faithless shepherds of Israel who exploit the people of God for personal gain. The list of Old Testament texts is extensive, and we will consider a number of them. The list includes Ezekiel 34, Isaiah 56:9-12, Jeremiah 23:1-8 (which we read as our Old Testament lesson), 25:32-38, Zechariah 11, and even the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. In John 10, Jesus will make the point that the Pharisees, who have just demonstrated their rank unbelief in their treatment of both Jesus and the man born blind, are false shepherds who will come under the covenant curses.

In light of the solemnity of Jesus' pronouncement of the covenant curse upon the Pharisees at the end of chapter 9, it is likely that the "Good Shepherd" discourse given by Jesus in verses 1-21 of John 10, follows shortly after the Feast of Booths. Verse 21 points us in this direction as well. The second half of John 10 (vv. 22-42, which serves as an extension and explanation of Jesus teaching in vv. 1-21) is said to occur during the Feast of Dedication, which was celebrated in winter, about three months after the Feast of Booths, yet three months before the Passover, when Jesus will fully reveal God's glory when he is lifted up on the cross, and will make that final sacrifice for sin which the Passover pre-figures. As we move into John chapter 10, and the Good Shepherd discourse, John is bringing us ever closer to that point when Jesus' dreaded hour finally arrives.

As we turn to our text (the first twenty-one verses of John 10), we read in verse 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.*" Any astute reader of John has learned that whenever Jesus says "truly, truly," we should perk up our ears and listen carefully to what follows. In the words which open the discourse, Jesus is exhorting us to pay careful attention, because his words will focus upon his role in redemptive history and include stern warnings about thieves and robbers who plunder God's flock.

The Good Shepherd discourse uses a simple illustration from daily life in first-century Palestine, yet at the same time resounds with echoes from a number of familiar Old Testament passages. The people of John's day were around sheep constantly. Many people kept flocks. Sheep were kept in a sheep pen, which was often built adjacent to, or as a part of the entrance into a family's home (most often walled off in the courtyard). The mother and wife in every such Palestinian home of that era surely wore herself out exhorting everyone who entered her home to check the bottom of their sandals.

In the discourse, Jesus alludes to another common practice associated with sheep-herding. A group of families would keep their sheep together and then hire someone to watch the sheep, take them to pasture, and so on. This hired "shepherd" would allow the sheep to graze, he would find them water, and make sure that all sheep return to the pen at night so they were not killed by wild animals, or stolen by sheep-rustlers. The shepherd especially watched the gate lest the sheep escape. A thief would have to enter into the sheep pen by other means, sneaking over the fence, out of the shepherd's sight.

So, when Jesus begins his discourse, those hearing him knew that he was about to say something which was intended for all to hear ("truly, truly"). Jesus uses a familiar illustration to make his point (sheep, pens, gates, and shepherds). More importantly, his words immediately harken his hearers back to Ezekiel 34, wherein YHWH speaks against the false shepherds of Israel in the days of Ezekiel. YHWH tells his people in the remarkable words of Ezekiel 34:22-25, "*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.*"

The same blessings and curses are pronounced in the first 6 verses of Jeremiah 23. *“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: ‘You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. ‘Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”*

In Ezekiel 34, the sheep are said to be YHWH’s, and the failure of Israel’s shepherds by not caring for his sheep (his “flock”), prompts YHWH to come in judgment and again place his people under one shepherd, one who stands in the royal line of David. In Jeremiah 23, the failure of the shepherds to care for God’s flock prompts YHWH to send David’s “righteous branch,” the “Lord our righteousness”—in other words, YHWH will send Jesus to be the faithful shepherd of Israel. There is little doubt that those listening to Jesus would have quickly caught the connection between Jesus’ words, and these Old Testament passages which were well-familiar to the Jews of Jesus’ day. In light of what the Pharisees had done to the blind man, their plotting against Jesus, and the covenant curse Jesus pronounced upon them, it will soon become obvious that Jesus is speaking about the Pharisees when he speaks of strangers, thieves, and robbers.

As Jesus begins his discourse, he asserts that the true shepherd does not sneak into the pen like a common thief looking to steal sheep. Says Jesus, in verses 2-3, *“but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens.”* The gatekeeper is an “under-shepherd” who keeps watch over the pen at night—keeping thieves and predatory animals away. When the shepherd arrives each morning he enters the door (the gate) of the sheep pen, and is welcomed by not only the under-shepherd, but by his flock, who know that grazing time has come. Says Jesus, *“the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”* The sheep—who are intimately familiar with their shepherd’s voice—follow him as he directs them. They implicitly trust him. They do not doubt where he is taking them and they do not question his purposes. Where the shepherd goes, the sheep go. They recognize his voice when he calls their name and leads them where he wants them to go.

Although Jesus is speaking using sheep as his illustration, his point is hard to miss—especially in light of Numbers 24:15-17, where we read, *“Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, ‘Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.’”* Jesus is the shepherd foretold by Moses, leading the people of God. It is Jesus who calls his people, whom he knows by name, to be his sheep—just as he had done with the blind man.

All of those whom God has chosen in eternity past to save (through the merits of Jesus), are given eternal life, and are called to trust in Jesus Christ through the means of the preaching of the Gospel. Those chosen by God, come to trust in Jesus Christ when they hear his voice in the gospel. Jesus’ point is that we are YHWH’s sheep, and he is our shepherd. This is the doctrine of effectual calling.

Palestinian shepherds do not herd their sheep using cattle dogs or on horseback as with western

shepherds. Instead, Palestinian shepherds lead their sheep by calling them.<sup>1</sup> Jesus offers an explanation in verses 4-5. “*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.*” Since the sheep know the shepherd’s voice, they follow him wherever he takes them. But let a stranger call these same sheep and they will not follow because they do not know the stranger’s voice. As we will see later on in the discourse, the true identity of the stranger (in Jesus’ discourse) is revealed in verse 12—the stranger is the thief and the robber.

Jesus’ point is that those who are his will follow him when he calls them. As that shepherd promised throughout the Old Testament, Jesus will lead and protect his flock, just as in the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm (a messianic Psalm). “*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.*”

In the first five verses of this chapter, Jesus connects himself to Israel’s Davidic shepherd (as the righteous branch, the Lord our righteousness), as the faithful shepherd who will lead God’s people as foretold by Moses, and as that one foretold by the prophets who will truly lead and protect God’s flock against thieves and predators, that one who calls God’s people (his sheep) through the word of the Gospel. Jesus has said much in very few words. It is from these words, in part, that we as Reformed Christians develop our doctrines of effectual calling and illumination—when the Good Shepherd calls, his sheep follow, because his people hear his voice in his word.

Yet, when we read in verse 6 that the people listening to him were struggling to make sense of Jesus’ words, we can sympathize with them because Jesus has said so much, and has once again placed himself in an unexpected way at the very center of Israel’s history. This does not mean that those to whom Jesus is speaking are not his sheep, only that like sheep, it takes a while to learn the shepherd’s voice. Yet once this occurs, the sheep never forget it. John informs us, “*this figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*” There are many wonderful images here, coupled with the growing sense on the part of those listening, that this discourse is not really about sheep, but is about the course of redemptive history. That which Moses and the prophets had foretold is even now being realized in their presence through the messianic mission of Jesus. God’s judgment was about to fall upon the faithless shepherds, just as it had in the days of Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

Ever patient with us when we are slow to grasp these wonderful truths, Jesus explains his point in more detail. In verse 7, “*Jesus again said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.’*” Jesus, the true shepherd enters through the gate because he is the gate. Scholars struggle with what Jesus means by this—“how can he be both the gate and the shepherd?”—but his point may be as simple the fact that he is completely unlike all the others who have come before. “*All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.*” Jesus has not come to plunder and exploit God’s people. His sheep do not follow false shepherds, thieves, and robbers, because they were waiting to hear their true shepherd’s voice. To put it another way, Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and true shepherd, who has come to call God’s sheep (YHWH’s flock) to follow him (trust in Jesus).

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to Jesus, 383.

In verse 9, Jesus again affirms, “*I am the door.*” Notice the use of the I AM (*ego emi*) formula again. The gate is the point of entry into the safety of the sheep pen. Jesus explains, “*if anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.*” There is only one entrance into the safety of God’s flock—Jesus, just as we read in John 14:6, when Jesus says, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” If anyone enters that flock through the gate (“by me”) that is, through Jesus’ person and work, they will be saved (delivered from God’s wrath on the day of judgment), they will enjoy the blessings of both the green pasture the shepherd finds for the sheep (i.e., the promises of Psalm 23), as well as the shelter of the sheep pen (guarded by the Good Shepherd).

But Jesus also warns his hearers about those with sinister designs upon God’s sheep. In verse 10, our Lord warns, “*the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.*” The thief has no regard for the sheep, only the benefit which the sheep provide for him. The thief attempts to make God’s sheep his own, or else butchers them, or even leaves them to fend for themselves outside the pen where they are at the mercy of all kinds of predators while away from the protection of the shepherd.

Not so with Jesus, who now promises his sheep, “*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*” The abundant life which Jesus promises is not in any sense referring to material blessings (along the lines of modern prosperity preachers). Rather, this is a way of referring to the fact that Jesus alone is the source of eternal life. This same idea (“abundant life”) is spoken of in the synoptic gospels in terms of “entering God’s kingdom.” Jesus is referring to all of the blessings described above which he secures for YHWH’s flock, the sheep over which he is shepherd.<sup>2</sup>

As if anyone had missed the point, Jesus now declares plainly in verse 11, “*I am the good shepherd.*” Although our image of the Good Shepherd and his little lambs has been sentimentalized (the shepherd as a slight young boy, with the cute lamb over his shoulders), our image of the shepherd ought to be more like that of a cowboy out on the range (minus the Winchester)—a tough figure capable of defending himself and his flock, and resourceful enough to find water and suitable land on which to graze. But the shepherd image as Jesus uses it is clearly messianic. Jesus is that one who will come as the messianic shepherd who will provide for, and protect, YHWH’s flock.

Even more, Jesus says, “*the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*” On one level, the point which Jesus is making is that he will defend his flock to the greatest of lengths. Here, the warning found in Zechariah 11:17 comes to mind. “*Woe to my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be wholly withered, his right eye utterly blinded!*” Jesus will never desert his sheep. But on another level, we have in our Lord’s words a significant statement about the nature of his coming death upon the cross—“for the sheep.” Jesus makes plain that it is not his intention to make everyone “savable” (by dying in some general sense for each person who has lived in each and every age), and that he will then save those who meet one condition (they believe in Jesus), thereby making his death effectual. This turns faith into a work we must do (it is the one thing God requires of us to be saved). Such a view shifts the ground of our salvation away from the saving merits of Christ (his death and obedience), to our act of faith. This is called “hypothetical universalism.”

Rather, Jesus says, his intention is to lay down his life for his sheep—all those given to him by the Father (those specific individuals for whom Jesus prays in his high priestly prayer of John 17). No doubt, Jesus’ death is sufficient to save a million worlds of lost and fallen sinners, but his intention as he expresses it

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<sup>2</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 384-385.

here is to save his sheep—his elect, by laying down his life for his sheep, and only for his sheep. It is from texts such as this one that the Reformed embrace “particular redemption” (or, as it is often known, “limited atonement”). Jesus intends to save specific people (the elect) and he lays down his life for them.

Because of his saving intentions (laying down his life for his sheep, whom he knows by name), Jesus is not like those who have come before. *“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.”* As Jesus reiterates in verse 14, *“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.”* Jesus knows those who are his. He knows them even, as the Father knows him. He lays down his life *for the sheep*. Jesus is not a hireling, stranger, or thief, who will abandon his sheep when they need him most—when savage wolves approach the flock.

At this point, Jesus introduces a new and remarkable theme into his discourse—Jesus’ redemptive work as messianic shepherd will extend beyond Israel to include Gentiles. In verse 16, he tells the audience, *“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.”* The one flock is the church, which unites both Jew and Gentile into the one body of Christ. Paul speaks of this in Ephesians 2:11 and following when he speaks of Gentiles being added to the people of God, in addition to believing Jews, through the shed blood of Jesus when he lays down his life for his sheep.

All of this is being done to fulfill YHWH’s redemptive purpose. Jesus declares in verses 17-19, *“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.”* Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure (his death, resurrection, and ascension). Jesus will lay down his life for his sheep (on the cross), he will take it up again (in his resurrection from the dead). But he is never a victim of forces he cannot control (the plotting of the Pharisees, or the sentence of death meted out by the Roman governor, Pilate). Jesus willingly lays down his life for his sheep based upon his own authority (as the eternal word made flesh), an authority which fulfills the charge (command) given to him by YHWH (in that eternal covenant, the so-called covenant of redemption, made between the Father, Son, and Spirit, in which the Son saves all those given him by the Father). Jesus is the good shepherd and this pleases YHWH, who loves the Son.

Jesus has opened up the ground under the audience’s feet yet again. He forces decision. John tells us that among those hearing him speak, *“there was again a division among the Jews because of these words.”* The response to Jesus (verses 20-21) is exactly what we have come to expect. *“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?’”* The false shepherds, still in their sins, accuse their Messiah of being possessed by a demon. Others recognize that God is clearly with Jesus—even though they are not quite sure what all of this means. No demon ever had compassion on a blind man. Only a good shepherd would care so tenderly for his sheep.

As we draw some points of application, there are two things we must consider. First, in this passage, Jesus teaches us a number of important doctrines. Jesus implies that there is an eternal covenant in which YHWH has commissioned him to undertake his saving work on behalf of the elect which includes Gentiles (this is the covenant of redemption). Jesus calls us by name through his word (this is effectual calling). We hear his voice in his word (this is the work of the Spirit in illumination). Jesus tells us his saving intention is to lay down his life for his sheep (particular redemption), which he does willingly

(Jesus' passive obedience). All of these are important doctrinal distinctives of the Reformed tradition.

Second, not only does Jesus place himself yet again at the very center of Israel's history—he is the Good Shepherd foretold by Moses and the prophets—but he has come to tend to God's scattered flock and to bring judgment upon the false shepherds (the Pharisees). Of particular importance to us is that Jesus is a tender shepherd, who calls us, and gives us spiritual sight, as he leads us into green pastures. The Good Shepherd is always with us, protecting us when we enter the dreaded valley of the shadow of death (i.e., when we are sick and when we suffer). The Good Shepherd loves us, has laid down his life for us, has conquered death and the grave for us, and now calls us to follow him. And when we hear his voice say to us "I am the Good Shepherd," we gladly follow.