

The Good Shepherd

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[0 : 00] Let us bow our heads and we'll pray together. And let's come, as it were, with one heart to the Lord. And even though not physically on our knees, let's bow before him in our hearts and acknowledge that he is the great king, our Lord Jesus.

The one who cried, it is finished. The one who provided full atonement. So that all sin is forgiven for those who repent and turn to him.

Lord Jesus, you are very gracious. Gracious quite beyond anything we have deserved. And as we come to you again today, we thank you in our hearts that you have loved us so much.

And that you continue to love and care for us and to look after us as the shepherd looks after his sheep. And we pray, dear Lord Jesus, that because you are the good shepherd and the only shepherd, you will draw our hearts afresh to yourself, not only in love, but with a deep sense of dependence.

And a sense of readiness in our hearts to listen to your voice and to follow you and to obey you with gladness. We ask you, dear Lord Jesus, that you will give us the grace of teaching us to know and love you better and more truly.

[1 : 35] And our prayer is that as we seek to serve you in the days ahead, so our service may be blessed and may be effective and fruitful. As we commend you and draw people's attention to you in the face of others.

And we ask especially as Christmas time approaches that you will help us to hold out the words of life and truth about you to others. And that members of our circle of friends and our families, too, who have not ever come to you or thought hard about you will indeed come to listen to your words and will come to be part of the great flock of which you are the shepherd.

So please bless us today and lift us up and give us open ears to listen to your voice. We ask it for your dear name's sake. Amen.

Well, I shall be reading part of John's Gospel, chapter 10. And you'll see on a white sheet of paper that we have printed out the first 18 verses of John, chapter 10.

I do want to read just a few more verses, which come from a little bit later in the chapter, verses 27, 28 and 29.

[2 : 51] But I'll simply add them on after I've read the piece that we have in front of us. So John's Gospel, chapter 10, verse 1. Jesus is speaking. 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.

[4 : 08] 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.

[5 : 15] I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.

And from verse 27. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. Well, friends, you'll be well aware that our subject for today is the good shepherd.

But I'd like to start now from a rather odd corner of the Bible. Back in the book of Numbers, which takes us back to the 15th century B.C., the time comes towards the end of Numbers when Moses is about to die.

And in fact, the Lord tells him what's about to happen. So the Lord says to Moses, Go up this mountain of Abarim, and see the land that I've given to the people of Israel. And when you have seen it, you shall be gathered to your people.

[6 : 25] In other words, you shall die. So Moses begins to think rather rapidly on hearing this information of his imminent death. That's not surprising, really.

And he says to the Lord, Let the Lord 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 a sheep without a shepherd. Now the Lord immediately says to Moses, Take Joshua, the son of Nun, and lay your hand upon him.

So Joshua is appointed as the new leader, or the new shepherd of Israel. And really from that moment onward, the leaders of the people of Israel are regarded as the shepherds.

The Lord himself is always the chief shepherd, but the prophets and priests of Israel, and particularly the kings of Israel, are regarded as the shepherds. And their role is to look after the sheep, to feed them and protect them, to rule them, and to discipline them.

[7 : 26] Now over the centuries that followed, and you'll know this from the Old Testament, some of the kings of Israel and Judah were godly and good kings, but many of them were not.

And when the prophet Ezekiel began his ministry, which was in the 6th century BC, some 900 years after Moses, Ezekiel had some pretty scathing things to say about the wicked and false shepherds of Israel who had not looked after the sheep, but had spent their time oppressing them, dealing brutally with them, and if you'll pardon the pun, fleecing them in every way.

Now that is always the way that despotic rulers act, and it goes on in many countries still today. The despotic ruler regards his people not as valuable and needing care, but as important only for the ways in which they can enhance the leader's power, and wealth, and luxurious lifestyle.

Now when Jesus came to Israel, some 600 years after the prophet Ezekiel, things hadn't really changed. Israel was now in the hands of the Romans, and there was still a Jewish royal family, the Herods, but their lives were noticeably corrupt and ungodly.

And there's a telling moment, at the end of the ninth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus has been around the cities and villages of Israel, preaching and teaching the Gospel, and Matthew tells us that when Jesus saw the great crowds of people milling around him, he had compassion on them.

[8 : 55] His heart went out to them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Now Jesus knew his Old Testament history.

He knew how wicked and corrupt so many of the Old Testament rulers of Israel had been. And he also knew how hard-hearted and corrupt so many of the Jewish leaders in his own day had become, Pharisees and priests and teachers of the law, who had lost a true understanding of the Old Testament.

So the consequence was that the people in Jesus' day were shepherd the sheep. And to the shepherd the sheep of Israel, Jesus' heart went out in loving compassion.

He knew that there was only one good shepherd, himself, and he knew that if only the people would place themselves under his loving rule, they would find safety. But so many of them didn't recognize him for who he was.

And it's because the Pharisees and Jewish priests had lost a true view of God and were not shepherding the people of Israel properly, that's why Jesus had such harsh things to say about them.

[10:01] And he says some of those harsh things here in John chapter 10. He calls them thieves and robbers, in verse 1, and again in verses 8 and 10. He calls them strangers, in verse 5, and hired hands, in verse 12.

Jesus could see so clearly that these Jewish leaders were robbing the people and destroying them and allowing them to become prey for wolves. And it's against this background of false, greedy, destructive shepherding that Jesus cries out to the people, I am the good shepherd.

And the good news about the good shepherd is that he is still the good shepherd today. And countless Christians over the last 2,000 years would readily testify to just how good it is to be fed, protected, and disciplined by Jesus Christ.

To be a sheep in his flock is to be on the receiving end of enormous privileges and blessings. And we'll look at some of these in just a moment. However, there is one thing we must reckon with first. Before any of us can be a sheep in the flock of Jesus, we have to acknowledge that we need a shepherd. And that goes against the grain of our natural humanity because in our natural state, we reckon that we're self-sufficient.

[11:23] If you ever get, if you're visiting some of the big country houses of Scotland or England and you look at the coats of arms of the old noble families, you'll see on those coats of arms the mottos seem to have exaggerated claims to self-sufficiency.

You'll see mottos that say things like valiant in war or to paraphrase it a bit, if anyone tangles with our family it will knock their heads off. That's the kind of thing that people put up for their mottos. And the heraldic designs on these coats of arms show the heads of boars with sharp tusks or the heads of lions and leopards. Nobody has a coat of arms with the head of a mouse on it, do they? Or a chihuahua. Now Jesus asks us to acknowledge that we're not self-sufficient and strong but rather we need a shepherd. And it's very humbling.

If I acknowledge to the Lord Jesus that I'm a sheep it means that I'm saying to him I don't know how to look after myself. I need to be looked after.

[12:24] I'm very likely to stray. Morally I'm only frail and I'm inclined to evil. I need to place myself under the leadership of somebody who will protect me from my own folly and will show me how to live a useful life which is not simply centered on my own needs and gratifications.

So it's a humbling thing for any person to place himself or herself under the rule of the good shepherd. And some folk are unwilling to humble themselves like that because they want to cling on to the fantasy of their own self-sufficiency and strength.

But how self-sufficient and strong are any of us truly? I've been watching some of the autumn rugby internationals over the last few weekends on the television.

And I'm sure some of you have watched them as well. And you know how the game begins. The teams run out of the tunnel onto the pitch just before the national anthems are played. And they trot out, don't they, with a great show of swagger and strength.

These young men at the peak of physical fitness, usually about this tall and weighing 16 or 17 or 18 stone, all bulging chests and thighs like thunder.

[13:36] They look invincible, don't they? But then the whistle blows and the kick goes off and sometimes within the first minute of the game one of these players is stretchered off because he's had a knock to his hip or his ankle and he simply can't walk.

And you think to yourself, how strong is a human being really? Isn't all this self-sufficiency and bravado simply a fantasy? I mean, think of it. Physically, we're extraordinarily frail.

Emotionally, we're often like roller coasters and morally, our hearts are inclined to drink up evil like water. Once we begin to get a proper estimate of ourselves, we realize that we badly need a shepherd to look after us.

What a good thing it is then that there is a good shepherd who calls each one of us to place ourselves under his care and under his rule. So let's look at our passage.

I want us to notice first the main thing that qualifies Jesus to call himself the good shepherd and then secondly we'll look at some of the privileges and blessings that come to those who are sheep in his flock.

[14:46] So first, what is it that makes this shepherd so good? Well, it's there in verse 11. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep and you'll see it again in verse 15.

I lay down my life for the sheep. And he explains it a bit further in verse 18. No one takes my life 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. Now, you only have to think about that for a moment before you realize what a strange thing it is that he's saying here.

How can it be a good thing for a flock of sheep if their shepherd dies? I live out in rural Ayrshire in the country and I'm surrounded by flocks of sheep.

There are far more sheep close to me than there are human beings. And I know some of the farmers and shepherds who look after the sheep and I sometimes get into conversation and talk to them about how they manage their flocks. But one thing is obvious to me and that is that if a shepherd is with his flock and he's looking after his sheep if he were to die suddenly it would be simply a disaster for the flock not a blessing.

[16:03] The sheep need their shepherd so as to provide them with food and to shear their fleeces off in the summer and to treat them for maggots and foot rot and lots of other things that they suffer from. So how can it be a good thing for the good shepherd's flock to have the good shepherd die?

Now just look again at the words that Jesus uses in verse 11. The good shepherd he says lays down his life for the sheep for the sheep which means he lays down his life for their good on behalf of them.

In fact it means even more than that because in John's gospel the little word which is translated for is always used to indicate that a beneficial sacrifice is being made.

So when Jesus says that he lays down his life for the sheep what he means is that the loss of his life is the necessary price for the saving of their lives.

It's rather as if you were walking by the river one day and you saw a little child had fallen into the river and was drowning and you jumped in to rescue the little child and in the act of saving the child getting the child to the bank you yourself drowned.

[17:17] Now that would be sacrificing your own life so as to save somebody else's. And that's the kind of death that Jesus has died for his sheep. He was willing to undergo the most brutal horrible death perhaps the most brutal form of torture that human beings have ever devised for each other crucifixion.

He was prepared to endure that kind of death so that his sheep could be spared something even worse that is the torments of hell which we all deserve because from our earliest days we've ignored God and have chosen to rule ourselves rather than to submit to his loving rule.

So Jesus stood in for us and accepted the punishment that we deserved. He died in our place so that we should be forgiven and not condemned by God.

That is how good the good shepherd is. He is so good that he's been willing to lay down his life for the sheep so that our lives should be rescued eternally.

And when we realize what he's done for us and how dreadful it must have been for him to endure the punishment and the wrath of God surely we can do nothing but thank him.

[18:32] And the moment we begin to turn to him and thank him that's the moment when we begin to take our place in his flock amongst his sheep under his rule. Let me ask have you thanked him?

Have you as an individual thanked him for dying for you in that dreadful way? The good shepherd is good because he has laid down his life for the sheep. Well let's turn now to look at some of the privileges and blessings that come to those who are his sheep and here it is I want to turn to those later verses 27, 8 and 9 that I read and I want us to notice five privileges.

I'll be brief on each one of them but five privileges. First the first privilege is that the sheep hear his voice. Now some of you will have his master's voice records and CDs in your collection and you'll know that the logo or the picture on his master's voice records shows a little Jack Russell dog mostly white he's got a patch over one eye I think and he's listening with his ear carefully cocked towards an old fashioned gramophone bell and he's excited and very pleased because what he's listening to is his master's voice.

Now in just the same way the sheep who belong to the good shepherd learn to recognize his voice and listen to it and we hear it not only in the words actually spoken by Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John but in the whole Bible because the whole Bible is the word of God and the message of the Lord Jesus.

So as we learn to read the Bible with close attention and care we come to realize that in the end this is the only voice that carries real weight and authority the only voice that can be really trusted.

[20 : 19] It's not that we pay no attention to other voices yes we do listen to Mr. Cameron and Mr. Miliband and Mr. Sermond and Mr. Obama and we very much enjoy listening to our Queen when she speaks to us on Christmas Day she's a fine woman and we listen to lots of other people with half an ear if I can put it that way but there's only one voice that speaks with regal authority about who God is about who the Son of God is and about what is the purpose of our human life and that is the voice of the Good Shepherd to listen to his voice is to be brought into line with truth and reality it is to understand the very purpose for which we were made.

now the second privilege still in verse 27 is that the Good Shepherd knows his sheep so the sheep hear his voice but he knows the sheep as well in fact back in verse 3 he says that he calls each of his sheep by name Black Ears Crinkle Horn Curly Top Dozy Daisy Alistair Doreen Jim Stella when he says he knows each of his sheep what he means is that he knows them and acknowledges that they belong to him now that's the key element in it he knows them as his own of course at one level he knows every human being because he's made everyone he's not ignorant of anybody's character and heart but on the day of judgment he will refuse to acknowledge those who have refused to acknowledge him as their Lord remember what he says in Matthew chapter 7 on that day the day of judgment many will say to me

Lord Lord did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name and then I will declare to them I never knew you depart from me you workers of evil of lawlessness so this is the great privilege of God's people throughout the Bible that he knows his people and his people know him it's a mutual thing knowing and being known loving and being loved acknowledging and being acknowledged he's not ashamed to know and acknowledge those who are not ashamed to know and acknowledge him so if you're a Christian it's as though he looks at you and says to you I know you and I will say so publicly on the day of judgment and on that day all the world will know that I know you then the third great privilege is that his sheep follow him still verse 27 my sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me now to follow Jesus is both a comfort and a challenge it's a comfort in this sense that a sheep in his flock is given a pattern of life to follow remember how Jesus says in John chapter 8

I'm the light of the world he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life in other words we're able to follow a way that is well lit we can see where we're going we're not stumbling around in the darkness bumping into things and getting hurt and wandering in aimless circles because we can't make sense of human life when we're not Christians that's what happens we walk in darkness so it's a great comfort to walk in the light and to be able to see where we're going so we follow him in that sense but it's also a great challenge to us because to follow Jesus means to take the same road that he took if you like to plant our feet in his footprints sometimes if you're walking up in the highlands and you're climbing up a steep hill a grassy hill you find that the footholds have been cut by other people's feet before you I don't mean cut with a spade but cut by other people's feet and so to get up the steep hill you have to put your feet into the footholds that others have made before you now in the same way we walk in the steps of Jesus and his journey took him to places where he was fiercely opposed and finally crucified so if we follow him and if we're unashamed of him and his teaching we can only expect similar treatment remember he says elsewhere if anyone would come after me let him deny himself take up his cross and follow me in other words following him involves self-denial cross-bearing and in extreme cases martyrdom we can't rule out the possibility that any of us might experience that terrible privilege in fact more Christians are thought to have died for their faith in the course of the 20th century than in the course of the whole of the first 19th centuries

AD put together there are more modern martyrs than ancient ones so to follow Jesus is a great privilege and a great comfort but it will prove also to be a searching challenge for us now if that third privilege of following him makes us apprehensive the fourth privilege is a wonderful antidote to our fears and there it is in verse 28 I give them eternal life and they will never perish one of the most painful legacies that Adam and Eve have left us is that by nature we fear death and we find it rather

hard to believe that death is not the end of our existence we see our loved ones die of old age or illness or accident and we bury them and each time we go to a funeral like that we think to ourselves I shall be in a coffin just like that one day and I'm not very much looking forward to it but Jesus shows us here that death is not the end of human existence when we step through the gateway of death we shall step through into heaven or hell hell if we've never turned to Christ in faith heaven or eternal life if we are sheep in his flock glorious blessed eternal life it's the very thing that Jesus went to the cross to win for us that's why the good shepherd has laid down his life for the sheep so that he can say

[26 : 49] I give you eternal life I've won it for you paradise was lost by Adam and Eve but I've recovered it for you by accepting the wages of your sin and just notice the verb here I give them eternal life I give it to them we can't earn it by mighty endeavors we receive it as a free gift let me ask if you're not a Christian at the moment are you looking forward to receiving gifts this Christmas a bottle of port a box of Thorntons a hideous tie from your aunt which you'll never wear well we all look forward to gifts of one kind and another but there's only one gift only one gift that is worth having in the end and it's this one here in verse 28 it can only be received humbly and gratefully but it's the gift of eternal life I give them eternal life then the last great privilege is mentioned also by Jesus in the same verse no one will be able to snatch them from my hand that means that the person who truly and sincerely comes to Christ the shepherd is safe safe and just in case we needed it

Jesus says it again in the next verse where he puts it slightly differently he says my father who has given them to me is greater than all and no one is able to snatch them out of the father's hand so if we are gripped by the hand of Christ if we're sheep in his flock it means that we're also gripped by the hand of God the father and we are eternally safe and the devil cannot himself snatch us away so friend let me ask this simple question are you a sheep in the good shepherd's flock if you are you have enormous undeserved wonderful privileges you hear his voice you are known and acknowledged by him you follow him he gives you eternal life and you cannot be torn away from him if you're not a sheep in his flock yet come to him he's the only good shepherd there is no other let's bow our heads and we'll pray dear God our father we thank you that the Lord Jesus has been sent by you to lay down his life as our good shepherd so that we can be sheep in his flock eternally and that no one and nothing should be able to tear us away from eternal safekeeping so we do pray for all of us here this afternoon that you will bless us and give us hearts that are ready to hear and receive this wonderful message of the gospel and we ask it in Jesus name
Amen