



# “The Good Shepherd”

*Psalm 23; John 10:11-18*

**“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ” “For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven”**

***from the Nicene Creed***

This week, we continue our series, The Christ, turning to one of Jesus’ “I am” statements from John’s gospel: “I am the good shepherd.” Yet, it poses a problem for us. We think we “get it,” that we have here just a plain-spoken statement of comfort and

guidance. Very soft and warm – cute lambs leaping here and there, led by a kindly shepherd who gently cares for them, even carrying the lambs on his shoulders if need be. Very pastoral – and very shallow! As with all the “I am . . .” statements of Jesus, there is much more lying right below the surface.

One way to get deeper into any Bible passage is to read it carefully. This process of careful reading is called “exegesis,” from the Greek word for “leading out.” We strive to begin with the text and let it lead us to its meaning, rather than our reading meaning into the text.

Michael Gorman suggests that we think of exegesis as *investigation, conversation, and art*. Exegesis is the careful investigation of the many dimensions of the text, its historical/geographical/cultural setting, context, grammar, vocabulary, and so on. Exegesis is also a conversation with other readers of the text, including those who have come before us. They too have sought to discern the meaning of the text. Finally, good exegesis is an art, needing imagination, sensitivity, and intuition.<sup>1</sup> So let’s take a closer look at today’s passage from John -- a little exegesis.

## ***A closer look***

First, we have to set aside some of what we think we know about shepherds. Then, as now, those who personally herd sheep have to be strong and tough, working hard in often difficult conditions to guide and protect their herds. On occasions, the shepherds have to confront a wild animal that threatens the sheep. Some even die in the line of duty.

Next, Don Carson<sup>2</sup> notes that even the adjective “good” can get us off track. It is the typical translation of the Greek, *kalos*, which “suggests perhaps nobility or worth: the noble shepherd or the worthy shepherd.” Jesus is contrasting himself to hired hands who have no real attachment to their sheep, who are unworthy shepherds – unworthy of the responsibility given them.

Jesus is the “good shepherd” who “lays down his life for his sheep.” The worthy shepherds of the ancient near east may have sometimes been killed in the line of duty, but none of them intended to die. But, Carson suggests, Jesus’ strong language here is not merely about Jesus’ willingness to die for his sheep, but about his intention to do so, in line with the Father’s will (v. 17-18).

Even the preposition in v. 11, “for the sheep,” conveys this self-sacrificing act. In John’s gospel, the Greek preposition always occurs in a sacrificial context. In his analysis of this passage, Carson notes that:

In no case does this suggest a death with merely exemplary significance; the shepherd does not die as an example for his sheep, throwing himself off a cliff in a grotesque and futile display while bellowing, ‘See how much I love you!’ No, the assumption is that the sheep are in mortal danger; that in their defense the shepherd loses his life; that by his death they are saved. That, and that alone, is what makes him the *good shepherd*.

How intimate is the relationship between Jesus, the good shepherd, and his sheep? It is the intimacy shared by Jesus and his Father! (v. 15). There are even sheep that do not belong to Jesus, whom he “must” bring also, presumably a reference to Gentiles.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Gorman’s book, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A basic guide for students and ministers* is an excellent lay-suitable introduction to sound biblical exegesis.

<sup>2</sup> From Carson’s excellent commentary on John’s gospel in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary* series, Eerdmann’s Publishing, 1991. The extended quote that begins on this page is from p. 386 of the commentary.

<sup>3</sup> When you come to gospels, bear in mind that Jesus, all the disciples, and nearly everyone he teaches or encounters, is Jewish. It probably surprised many of them to hear Jesus talk about a herd that includes more than the Jews.

## Stepping back

There is a larger context at work in all seven of Jesus' "I am . . ." statements. The most important background here is Ezekiel 34 and the "shepherds of Israel," in which God promises to raise up a good shepherd from the house of David. Clearly, in today's passage, Jesus claims to be the fulfillment of that promise. But there is more.

God as the Good Shepherd is one of the dominant portraits of God in the Scriptures, cutting across both the Old and New Testaments. Psalm 23 is certainly the most wellknown, but, like Ezekiel, the prophets Jeremiah and Micah also make use of the good shepherd imagery (Jer. 23:1-3, Micah 5:2,4). There are numerous times that the biblical writers refer to God's people as the sheep who need a shepherd.

These images of shepherd and sheep help us to grasp that Jesus' statement, "I am the good shepherd," is more than a statement about his identity. It focuses us on the *relationship* between Jesus and his followers, those who have placed their faith in this shepherd. We have heard his voice and we follow him. As the writer of Hebrews put it, Jesus is "the great shepherd of the sheep" (13:20).

As Gail O'Day reminds us in her commentary on John, the images that Jesus gives us are intensely relational; they have no meaning without the sheep. Each of us is among those for whom Jesus is willing to die. Who we are cannot be separated from who Jesus is. May we hear evermore clearly our shepherd's voice.

### The Poems called the Psalms

Knowing how poetry is put together can help us surmount some of the barriers to understanding and appreciation. This is no less true for Hebrew poetry than it is for contemporary poetry. However, Hebrew poetry is not put together the way English poetry is put together. For example, I like poems that rhyme -- but this is not how Hebrew poetry was written. There are two principal characteristics of Hebrew poetry: rhythm of thought and rhythm of sound.

*Rhythm of thought* is the balancing of ideas in some structured form. Here are a few examples:

- Using synonyms

Psalm 24:2

for he founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the waters.

- Using metaphors

Psalm 18:31

For who is God besides the Lord?  
And who is the Rock except our God?

- Using word order

Psalm 1:2

But his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.

- Using parallel parts of speech

Psalm 19:7-8

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.  
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making the wise simple.  
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.  
The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

There are many more examples of techniques that the Hebrew poets used to create a rhythm in the expression of their thoughts. We need to keep this in mind when we are reading the poems. Look for the big point; listen for what it says to your heart. The psalms resist a detailed analysis of each word and phrase. The poets also used a variety of techniques to create a rhythm of sound in the poem. Some of the psalms are acrostics, in which the first letters of succeeding lines or stanzas spell out the alphabet, a word, or a phrase. Sometimes the poets used alliteration, in which each word begins with the same consonant. The poets also used a lot of word plays. Unfortunately, nearly all of this is lost when the Hebrew is translated into another language. Many commentaries on the Psalms can help you see the poet's art.