

John 10:1-10

Limits of the Text

The complete passage is John 10:1-21, but in it Jesus used two different metaphors to describe himself. In 7-10 he is the door, and in 11-18 he is the shepherd. The entire passage could be taught together; I split it at verse 10 in order to focus on each metaphor individually.

Interpretation

It is important to note that this periscope immediately follows the previous one without any bridges, and it ends with the crowd saying, “A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind,” a reference back to chapter 9. These reveal that Jesus was still talking with the Pharisees.¹ When Jesus healed the man born blind, they accused him of being a sinner (9:24) and tossed him out of the synagogue (9:34). Though they claimed to have insight, Jesus said they were spiritually blind and still in their sins (9:41). It was to them that Jesus told this short story about the shepherd and his sheep. He was giving them another chance to realize they were spiritually blind shepherds who were destroying the sheep instead of leading them.

The setting of the story is a sheepfold. There were more than one type of sheepfolds in ancient Palestine.² This sheepfold may have been a large courtyard that was in front of a house and shared a wall with it, or it may have been a large, independent enclosure that was shared by multiple families.³ In either case, it would have stone walls topped with briars for protection and a door on one side.

1 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. 2 “But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. 3 “To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 “When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 “A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.”⁴

This was a very familiar scene of a shepherd going to a sheepfold early in the morning to retrieve his flock. This sheepfold was apparently very large as it was used by

¹ And that this was a lousy place to add a chapter break.

² There is a different type of sheepfold in verse 7.

³ Carson argues for the later, as there were multiple flocks in the sheepfold (381).

⁴ All Scripture is NASB95 unless noted otherwise.

multiple families to keep their flocks inside. The door had doorkeeper to guard the flocks while the shepherds were away. The shepherd was recognized by the doorkeeper, came in through the door, and called for his flock. They followed his voice, and he led them away to the pasture for the day. A person who climbed over the wall could only be a thief, and if a stranger tried to call the sheep, they would not follow him.

6 This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them.

“Figure of speech” (παροιμία) is a difficult to translate word; it can refer to a wide variety of literary forms, including proverbs, maxims, allegories, parables, riddles, and taunts. “The common feature in these quite different genres is that there is something enigmatic or cryptic about them.”⁵ This story is too long to be a proverb or a maxim. Some translations call it a parable, but this story is not technically a parable, since it lacks some of the elements of a parable. It is, however, similar to a parable in that it is a short story with symbolic meaning. It might be best to call it an symbolic short story.⁶

Although the story is symbolic, not every part is significant.⁷ The sheep, the shepherd, and the thief have meaning, but the wall, the door, the multiplicity of flocks, and the doorkeeper do not.

Using shepherds and sheep symbolically did not originate with Jesus; this language has a rich tradition in the Old Testament. Sheep were long used as an apt description for God’s people, who are characterized as being helpless and needing guidance, and thus God always appointed certain people as shepherds. God commanded the judges to be shepherds over Israel (1 Chr 17:6), and he called Saul to do the same (2 Sa 5:2). When the prophet Micaiah predicted the death of King Ahab, he said that Israel would be like sheep without a shepherd (2 Chr 18:16).

Perhaps the most pertinent examples are of false shepherds, the leaders of Israel who exploited the people instead of caring for them. Jeremiah 23:1-2 says,

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: “You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,” declares the LORD.

Isaiah 56:11-12 says,

⁵ Carson, 383.

⁶ Borchert prefers to use a Semitic designation known as a *mashal* or symbolic illustration. It is a “figurative text that can interweave as few or as many tangents and implications as are considered necessary by the writer or storyteller” (329).

⁷ “Some [details] are included as necessary parts of the picture even though they have no part to play in the symbolism” (Morris, 447).

They are shepherds who have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each one to his unjust gain, to the last one. "Come," they say, "let us get wine, and let us drink heavily of strong drink; and tomorrow will be like today, only more so."

God, of course, is the consummate shepherd, the standard for other shepherds. David wrote, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Ps 23:1). Everyone in the world are like sheep who have gone astray (Is 53:6). Finally, the most important reference is Ezk 34:23, wherein God promised to send his shepherd, saying, "Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd." This is, of course, a reference to Jesus.

The Pharisees would have been familiar with this rich tradition, but when Jesus gave them the story, they could not interpret it. The Pharisees probably guessed who the sheep were, but they could not identify the shepherd or the thief. They didn't understand his teaching, because they were not his sheep and did not hear his voice!

7 So Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.

At this point, Jesus developed the story further and interpreted it for the Pharisees. He changed the setting of the story from the large sheepfold near where the families lived to a smaller sheepfold out in a pasture. In this type of sheepfold, there was no door, because when a door was needed, the shepherd *was* the door.⁸ Jesus identified himself as the shepherd who was the door for his sheep when they were out in the pasture.

8 "All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. 9 "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Jesus contrasted his shepherding with that of other shepherds. He called the previous shepherds thieves and robbers. They were "the religious leaders who are more interested in fleecing the sheep than in guiding, nurturing and guarding them. They are the leaders of ch. 9, who...belittle and expel the sheep."⁹ The Sadducees were known for making a lot of money from the temple religion, and Jesus denounced both the Pharisees and scribes for loving money (Lk 16:14; Mk 12:40).¹⁰ Though he didn't say it out loud, clearly Jesus was intimating that the Pharisees were in this group.¹¹

Jesus, however, was the shepherd who was the door for the sheep. As the door, he provides two things for his sheep. The first thing Jesus provides is salvation. While the sheep are grazing in the pasture, a wild animal might threaten them. When threatened,

⁸ This is still done in some Middle Eastern countries.

⁹ Morris, 383.

¹⁰ Morris, 451.

¹¹ Carson argues that the "thieves and robbers" included messianic pretenders. Though possible, that's hardly the point here, as his audience, the Pharisees, would not be such (385).

they would run into the sheepfold, where the shepherd would stand as the door to guard the sheep from the threat, thus he was the door that saved the sheep from their enemy. In a similar manner, Jesus provides salvation for his sheep. He was not referring to salvation from enemies—Jesus was not a political or military leader—but salvation from their sins and from eternal judgment to the blessings of God.¹² As there was only one gate, so Jesus is the one means of salvation. The meaning is the same as another of Jesus’ “I am” sayings, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me” (14:6).

The second thing Jesus provides is nourishment. The sheep can go in and out of the sheepfold as they want. When they went out, they were in the pasture, where they had food and water. Their needs were met. In a similar manner, Jesus provides nourishment for his sheep. This is not a reference to meeting our physical needs but rather our spiritual needs.

Given the word picture of grass and water, one might think that all Jesus provides is the bare minimum basics. He clarified that the nourishment that he brings doesn’t just give life but abundant life. Abundant means “going beyond what is necessary;”¹³ it is more than a person would normally expect or anticipate. “The gift of Jesus is life beyond our wildest dreams.”¹⁴

Here are a few examples of the abundant life that Jesus gives. David wrote,

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; he guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake” (Ps 23:1-3).

Peter wrote,

“His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. By these He has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desires” (2 Pt 1:3-4, HCSB).

Paul wrote,

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Php 4:6-7)

He also wrote,

¹² Morris, 452.

¹³ Arndt, 805.

¹⁴ Borchert, 333.

“I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Php 4:12-13, HCSB).

Textual Outline

1. Jesus told a story about sheep and a shepherd (10:1-6).
2. Jesus continued and interpreted the story (10:7-10).
 - a. Jesus is the shepherd who saves his sheep (10:7-9a).
 - b. Jesus is the shepherd who nourishes his sheep (10:9b-10).

Central Truth of the Text

John wrote John 10:1-10 in order to compare Jesus to a shepherd who guards the door.

Teaching Outline

Like sheep run to their shepherd, we run to Jesus. Today, I want to encourage you to run to Jesus the Shepherd. From our text in John 10, we are going to see 3 reasons to run to Jesus.

1. Run to Jesus for salvation (10:9).
2. Run to Jesus for provision (10:9).

Works Cited

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