

John 10:11-21

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

The theme of this text is obvious, as five times Jesus said that he lays down his life.

11 “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”¹

At this point, Jesus developed the story in yet another direction and continued to interpret it for the Pharisees.² The job of a shepherd can be dangerous. Wild animals may attack the flock, looking to snatch a sheep. Jacob had sheep torn apart by wild beasts (Ge 31:39). David had fought a lion and a bear (1 Sa 17:34-35). “In Bible times lions, wolves, jackals, panthers, leopards, bears, and hyenas were common in the countryside.”³ This is what separates good shepherds from bad: When his flock is attacked, a good shepherd will fight the wild beast, even at risk to his own life. Jesus is the good shepherd. He was not only willing to die, but he came for the very purpose of dying for the benefit of his sheep.⁴ This is why he is good.⁵

In the Old Testament, God was known as the shepherd of his people, Israel. Asaph called God the Shepherd of Israel, the one who leads Joseph like a flock (Ps 80:1). Jeremiah said that God “will watch over his people like a shepherd watches over his flock” (Je 31:10, NET). Isaiah wrote, “Like a shepherd he tends his flock; he gathers up the lambs with his arm; he carries them close to his heart; he leads the ewes along” (Is 40:11, NET). In a similar manner, Jesus is known as the shepherd of his people, the church. In Hebrews he is the great shepherd of the sheep (13:20), and Peter calls him chief shepherd (1 Pt 5:4).

12 “He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and

¹ All Scripture is from NASB95 unless stated otherwise.

² The first change in the story was in verse 7.

³ Walvoord, 2:310.

⁴ The metaphor breaks down here, because no shepherd intends to die for his sheep. That would be the worst thing he could do, as it would leave the sheep completely defenseless.

⁵ It could be translated, “I am the true shepherd” or “I am the authentic shepherd.”

scatters them. 13 “He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. 14 “I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, 15 even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.

If a wild animal attacked while a hired hand was watching the sheep, the hand would probably run away and save himself. Why would he run? He would run because he is not concerned about the sheep. They are of no real interest to him; he is only interested in the money.

The hired hand is not actually symbolic of anyone; he simply serves as a foil.⁶ The motivation of the hired hand is contrasted with the motivation of Jesus. Jesus knows his own, those who are his “sheep.” He doesn’t shepherd his people in order to gain something; he shepherds because he knows and loves people and has a close, personal relationship with them. “‘I know My sheep’ stresses His ownership and watchful oversight. ‘My sheep know Me’ stresses their reciprocal knowledge of and intimacy with Him.”⁷ This relationship with the sheep is modeled upon his own relationship with God the Father within the Trinity. They perfectly know and relate to each other.

16 “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.

Almost as an aside, Jesus mentioned the scope of his shepherding, which is the whole world. Not only is he the shepherd for Jews, he is also the shepherd for Gentiles. This verse predicts the church. Isaiah predicted this when he wrote that God gathers the dispersed of Israel and will gather others as well (Is 56:8). John later wrote that Jesus did not die for the nation of Israel only but “also to unite the scattered children of God” (11:52, HCSB). Paul wrote about this blending of Jews and Gentiles into “one new man,” the church, in Ep 2:13-15:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace.”

17 “For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. 18 “No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.”

⁶ “A foil is a character who contrasts with another character (usually the protagonist) in order to highlight particular qualities of the other character” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foil_\(literature\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foil_(literature))).

⁷⁷ Walvoord, 2:310.

These two verses are the heart of the text, wherein Jesus gave four Christological truths. The first truth is that Jesus died in order to rise again. Jesus' death without a corresponding resurrection would be meaningless and purposeless. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins" (1 Co 15:17). Christ's triumph over death and the grave is our triumph over sin and death. Jesus had to take his own life up again.

The second truth is that Jesus voluntarily died. No one took it from him; no one had the ability or the authority to kill. All the legions of Rome could not take down the one who had all the angels of heaven at his disposal (Mt 26:53). Jesus loves his Father and is loved by him, and Jesus knows and loves his sheep, so he chose to die.

The third truth is that Jesus raised himself from the dead. This statement is somewhat disconcerting, because other verses say clearly that God raised him from the dead (Ro 10:9). There are, however, a few verses that say Jesus raised himself. To the Jews in the temple he said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19). Paul said that Jesus had to suffer and rise again (Ac 17:3). As Jesus is God, these verses do not represent any discrepancy. In fact, the point is that Jesus is God, because he is able to raise himself up.

The fourth truth is that the Father commanded him to die. Salvation by death on the cross has always been the Father's plan, so he commanded it. There is never disunity within the Trinity, so the Son was willing to do it. Jesus said he does exactly as the Father commands (14:31). "Looking at the crucifixion from God's perspective assures us that no part of it took place outside God's plan."⁸

Because the Son was willing to die, the Father loves the Son. "It is not that the Father withholds his love until Jesus agrees to give up his life on the cross and rise again. Rather, the love of the Father for the Son is eternally linked with the unqualified obedience of the Son."⁹

19 A division occurred again among the Jews because of these words. 20 Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?" 21 Others were saying, "These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?"

As always, his teachings divided people. Some said he must be possessed by a demon and that was making him insane, because only an insane person would say he could give away his life and then raise it up again. Others said that he could not have been possessed, because demon-possessed people do not speak like this, and demons

⁸ Carson, 389.

⁹ Carson, 388.

certainly do not heal blind people (9:7). His teaching may have been obscure, but it wasn't crazy.

Textual Outline

1. Jesus lays down his life because he cares for his sheep (10:11-13).
2. Jesus lays down his life because he knows his sheep (10:14-16).
3. Jesus lays down his life so that he will take it up again (10:17-21).

Central Truth of the Text

John wrote John 10:11-21 in order to explain to his Jewish readers why Jesus laid down his own life.

Teaching Outline

Jesus voluntarily laid down his life for us, so it's important for us to understand why. Today I want to help you understand why he did this. From our text in the book of John, we are going to see three reasons why Jesus laid down his life for us.

1. Know that Jesus laid down his life because he cares for his sheep (10:11-13).
2. Know that Jesus laid down his life because he knows his sheep (10:14-16).
3. Know that Jesus laid down his life so that he could take it up again (10:17-21).

Works Cited

Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. 1991.
Walwood, John F., et al. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. 1985.