

John 10:7-10, 14-18, 22-42 (NIV2011)

⁷Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

¹⁴“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

²²Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon’s Colonnade. ²⁴The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

²⁵Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me, ²⁶but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. ³⁰I and the Father are one.”

³¹Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, ³²but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?”

³³“We are not stoning you for any good work,” they replied, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”

*There is one gate. There is one shepherd. There is one Jesus.
There is one God, one Lord, one Savior.*

Jesus’ simple statement, “I am the good shepherd,” 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.¹ So let's take a closer look at John 10:14-18, the "good shepherd" passage.

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 Carson² 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 life." 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.³

Stepping back

The most important biblical background to the Good Shepherd passage is Ezekiel 34 and the "shepherds of Israel," in which God promises to raise up a good shepherd from the house of David. Clearly, 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 well-known, 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).

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

²From 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.

³When 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.

Jesus brings all of this context about sheep and shepherds to bear when he, yet again, confronts the authorities in Jerusalem, as John recounts in 10:22-39.

A winter day

You and I would probably call it Christmas time. But this is Jerusalem, 2,000 years ago, and it is the time for Hanukkah, the festival of Dedication, commemorating the rededication of the temple in 164BC following its desecration by Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

Jesus is walking through a large building at the southern end of the immense temple courtyards when he is accosted by a threatening crowd. They know what he has been doing and they know what he has been saying. They want to know whether or not he is the Messiah, God's long-awaited rescuer who would lead the campaign to get rid of the Romans and cleanse the temple. And they want to know it in clear and uncertain terms.

Jesus' reply is straightforward. His words and actions speak for themselves, he says. If they can't see the truth, it is because they are deaf and not among the sheep for whom Jesus is the good shepherd, the sheep given to Jesus by the Father. And then, Jesus makes an unmistakable claim: "The Father and I are one" (v. 30).

In his commentary on John, Bruce Milne notes that:

In the course of his reply (25–30) Jesus refers to some of the supreme privileges of those who believe in him.

1. They are a *summoned* group. *My sheep listen to my voice* (27). The call of Christ has brought them into a new relationship with him (*I know them*); a relationship which in turn leads to a new lifestyle (*they follow me*). The proof of faith is obedience. 'Only he who truly obeys truly believes.'

2. They are a *gifted* group. The gift they receive is *eternal life* (28). All who believe will live; the new life of the kingdom is theirs. No longer a part of this passing 'world', under the power of the evil one, *they shall never perish* (28). They are part of the permanent.

3. They are a *secured* group: *no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand* (29). Christ's people are his possession. He has committed himself to them even as they for their part have, however falteringly, committed themselves to him. In this too the Father and the Son are one (30). The 'flock' has been given to the Son by the Father and he stands behind the Son in his guardianship of the flock. Hence the forces of opposition and destruction have to confront the awesome and limitless power of the Father, who is 'greater than all'. No profounder security is conceivable for the follower of Jesus.⁴

The crowd, of course, does not believe in Jesus. They think they know him and that he is only another rabble-rousing, would-be Messiah,⁵ with blasphemous notions of his own divinity. So they begin to pick up heavy, round stones to use to stone Jesus to death; this is the penalty for blasphemy.

Jesus offers the crowd some conciliatory words, but the crowds don't buy it. They close in on Jesus . . . and he escapes from their grasp yet again.

A truth too big to be grasped

How could we really expect the crowds to grasp the immensity of Jesus' claims? Can we really blame them for their cluelessness?

⁴ Milne, B. (1993). *The message of John : Here is your king! :With study guide*. The Bible speaks today (153). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press.

⁵ There were a variety of would-be Messiahs in the 100 years before and after Jesus. The last was Simeon Bar-Kochba who led a revolt against the Romans in 135AD. He even went so far as to mint coins marked year 1, year 2, and year 3 to connote the ushering of God's kingdom. As you might guess, the Romans put an end to all this.

Even for us, speaking of Jesus' identity and nature gets lost in a morass of little understood ten-dollar words and general confusion. Really, how could this man from Galilee be the Lord and Creator of the cosmos? Jesus and God: One? Really? It seems absurd on its face.

How could anyone be expected to believe such a thing? Why are we surprised that so many, even today, reject the notion out of hand?

The apostle Paul understood this. Invariably, when he arrived in a city and began to speak to them of Jesus, he was scoffed at and ignored. How silly! How crazy! Yet he pressed on. Like Jesus, he didn't water down the claims or pretend away their consequences. When we offer Christ to others, there is only Jesus to present – the Jesus who is. The Jesus who is God incarnate, fully God and fully human. All other "Jesuses" are no more real than the Easter bunny, and who would place their faith in a rabbit?

This is the place that John has been driving all along in his gospel. What began with these words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" has now come to this: "The Father and I are one." We don't have to immerse ourselves in the profound Trinitarian implications of these words to grasp that in Jesus we meet someone completely and utterly unique. He is a man; yet he is God. Deny either and you've lost the truth about Jesus.

Even more staggering is the knowledge that Jesus' vocation, his mission, was one of personal sacrifice, a willingness to lay down his life for his sheep. For he was not sent to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17).

Next week the shadow of the cross will fall squarely on Jesus as he begins the final portion of his journey.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Our Connection Groups have been watching segments of the film, *The Gospel of John*, each week. Chapter 9 of John's gospel begins at 1:16:17 of the film and ends at 1:24:15.

1. Who wants to be your good shepherd? There are always lots of folks lobbying for the job. Who tells you that they want to protect and provide for you? To show you the way to the life you've always wanted? You might share some stories of times in your life when a seeming "good shepherd" let you down, when you discovered that the shepherd wasn't as good as you thought or as able.
2. In what ways do these false shepherds (wolves dressed in shepherd's clothing?) fail us? Why do we find it so easy to invest our trust and our hopes somewhere other than in God? I'm reminded of the time the Israelites demanded a human king, just like all the peoples around them. The prophet Samuel reminded them that God was to be their king, but the Israelites would not relent. Samuel warned them that they better be careful what they wished for, as kings are inclined to thievery, mischief, and worse. But the people wanted a king (a good shepherd!) and so God gave them one. Of course, the shepherds of Israel turned out to be wolves themselves (Ezekiel 34).
3. The crowds can't grasp that Jesus is not only Messiah, but also Lord; that in making himself "equal to God," Jesus was merely stating the deep truth that even he may have only partially grasped at the time. He was not being blasphemous; he was merely telling the truth. Indeed he was the only person in all human history who could say such things and not be blasphemous.
 - What do you find hardest to grasp about Jesus? If a friend asked you to tell them more about Jesus, what would you say? How could we get better at answering that question? It doesn't really do to just send them to someone else or hand them a book, even if it is the Bible. They want to hear the story from you. How would you tell Jesus' story?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Psalm 23 A portrait of God as the good shepherd</p>	<p>Tuesday, Ezekiel 34 The shepherds of Israel</p>
<p>Wednesday, Romans 1:1-7 How would you summarize what Paul says about Jesus in the opening verses of this letter?</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Peter 1:1-2 Do you see the Trinitarian nature of Paul's salutation?</p>
<p>Friday, Philippians 2:5-8 What do you think is meant by "though he was in the form of God . . . emptied himself"?</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

