

# "I Am the Gate for the Sheep"

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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*Ezekiel 34:2-4, 9-16 (NRSV)*

Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup>You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup>You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. . . . <sup>9</sup>Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: <sup>10</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.

<sup>11</sup>For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup>As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. <sup>13</sup>I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. <sup>14</sup>I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup>I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. <sup>16</sup>I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

*John 10:1-10 (NRSV)*

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

*Sheep need a sturdy pen with a strong gate to protect them from the wolves and wild dogs. So do we! Jesus is the gate into the sanctuary offered us by God, the only gate.*

*Whoever enters by him will be saved.*

Both this week and next, we'll be in chapter 10 of John's gospel, wherein all of the imagery and metaphor is based on sheep and shepherds. Granted, this isn't a subject about which most of us know much. I actually spent a couple of summers in college working the Wyoming range helping to look for uranium deposits. I would occasionally come across very large flocks of sheep and their Basque shepherders, all of whom lived in small, horse-drawn wagons as they guided their sheep. These wiry, leathered men were the sheep's only protection from starvation and attack.

It isn't very hard for us to see the basics of the imagery into which Jesus leads us in chapter 10. He is the "gate for the sheep" and the "good shepherd." We can easily connect with images of caring, guiding, and protecting, but there is much more to these shepherding images.

By far, the most important Old Testament backdrop for Jesus' "I am" statements in John 10 comes from the mouth of Ezekiel, the prophet of Israel who lived more than

### What's up with the sheep?

Sheep and their shepherds play an important role in the Bible, but few of us have much experience with either. The following is adapted from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, which is a very helpful resource.

"Sheep were a central part of the Israelite economy from the earliest days (Gen 4:2). Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David and Amos were all shepherds (Gen 12:16; 26:14; Ex 3:1; 2 Sam 7:8; Amos 1:1).

Shepherds were not always men; shepherdesses include Rebekah (Gen 29:9) and the daughters of Jethro (Ex 2:16). Raised for both food (milk and meat) and wool, sheep were a natural part of life in the arid eastern Mediterranean because they can survive with a minimum of water and grass and can be moved to new grazing and watering areas during dry times. Sheep also figured prominently in the OT sacrificial system.

Conditions of shepherding in ancient Palestine provide the foundation for figurative references. These conditions were very different from most modern practices. Sheep were not fenced in and left to fend for themselves. Instead they were totally dependent on shepherds for protection, grazing, watering, shelter and tending to injuries. In fact, sheep would not survive long without a shepherd. Sheep are not only dependent creatures; they are also singularly unintelligent, prone to wandering and unable to find their way to a sheepfold even when it is within sight.

Sometimes other animals, such as goats, were mixed with sheep. This situation figures prominently in at least two biblical passages—Jacob's experiences with Laban's flocks (Gen 30–31) and Jesus' Olivet Discourse, with its picture of the final judgment as a time when God will separate sheep from goats (Mt 25:32–33)."

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600 years before Jesus. Ezekiel 34 is a sharp attack on the many kings of Israel and Judah, the "shepherds of Israel." The kings were generally a bad lot, who failed miserably at their task of caring for, guiding, and protecting their sheep, the Israelites, the people of God. With only a few exceptions, they are recorded in the book of Kings as doing "what was evil in God's sight."

Throughout the ancient Near East, including Israel, the shepherd was a metaphor for the kings and their responsibilities to guide, protect, and care for their people. And Israel's kings had failed miserably.

I've included in this study a large portion of Ezekiel 34, but you really ought to take a few minutes to read it in its entirety. You'll see that although it is a starkly drawn indictment of Israel's kings, it is also a deeply moving portrait of a God who loves deeply and will take care of his people. Their kings may have failed them, but God will not.

God will take over the shepherding of God's people: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak . . ." (from v. 15-16).

And how will God shepherd his people? "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them: I the LORD, have spoken" (v. 23-24).

Since David, the second king of the united Israel, had died centuries before Ezekiel, he cannot be who God has in mind as the servant who will shepherd God's people. Rather, this shepherd will come from David's royal line, bringing us to Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Jesus' claim to be of David's royal line is through Joseph, not Mary, as established in Matthew's genealogy (Ch. 1). Jesus' claim is as valid as if he carried Joseph's DNA. Our system works the same. An adopted child gets a new birth certificate with the names of the adoptive parents.

*“I am the gate for the sheep”*

Keeping always in mind the bad shepherds of Israel and God’s promise to raise up a shepherd himself, Jesus claims that he is the fulfillment of that promise. He is the shepherd, the one who leads the flock in the through the gate, echoing Psalm 118: “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it” (v. 18-19). But Jesus is not only the one who enters the through the gate, leading the flock into the safety of the pen, Jesus is the very gate itself . . . “the gate of the Lord.”

**Still more on sheep!**

“The helplessness of sheep helps to explain the actions and qualities of a good shepherd, who in the Bible is a case study in care and compassion. It was the task of a shepherd to lead sheep from nighttime protection in a sheepfold on safe paths to places of grazing and watering. After morning grazing and watering, sheep typically lie down for several hours at midday in a shady or cool place (Song 1:7), returning at night to the sheepfold, where the shepherd would attend to fevered or scratched sheep. To protect sheep against predators, shepherds would carry two pieces of equipment, the ‘rod and staff’ of Psalm 23:4, one of them a clublike weapon and the other the familiar crook used for protection, rescue and placing across the backs of sheep to count them as they entered the sheepfold (a process known as ‘the rodding of the sheep’; see Lev 27:32). Psalm 23, built around a typical day in the life of a shepherd, is a virtual handbook of these shepherding practices.

Shepherds were thus providers, guides, protectors and constant companions of sheep. They were also figures of authority and leadership to the animals under their care. So close is the connection between shepherd and sheep that to this day Middle Eastern shepherds can divide flocks that have mingled at a well or during the night simply by calling their sheep, who follow their shepherd’s voice. Shepherds are inseparable from their flocks, and their work is demanding, solitary and sometimes dangerous (Gen 31:38–40; 1 Sam 17:34–35). Shepherds were aided by their sons or daughters (Gen 37:12; 1 Sam 16:11) or hired help (Jn 10:12–13), again placing them in a position of authority and responsibility.”

“Very truly, I tell you,” he says, “I am the gate for the sheep. . . . I am the gate” (v. 7 & 9). He and no other is the way into the safety of the pen (v. 9a) and out to the luxurious forage of the pasture (9b).

As we have amply seen already in this series, and as we will continue to see, Jesus holds nothing back: “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” The world is filled with many who want to steal and to kill and to destroy. But Jesus is the gateway to eternal life, abundant life . . . life that can be given by no one else.

We marvel at the tapestry of powerful images that Jesus weaves together as he pushes us to confront and then to answer these questions: Do we believe? Do we trust that Jesus is who he claims to be? Do we trust that Jesus is the gateway to safety, to nourishment . . . to eternal life?

The gospel of John revolves around these questions. So many versions of Jesus float around in our world. So many “experts” claim to have at last discovered the real truth, which we’ll learn only if we watch the latest Easter-time TV special. We get the Gnostic Jesus of the gospel of Judas, the husband and father of the *Da Vinci Code*, the wandering sage filled with witty aphorisms of the Jesus Seminar, and more. No matter what sort of Jesus you are looking for, you can find it if you just have enough imagination.

But the Gospel of John reminds us that there is only one Jesus . . . and he still lives. He is *the bread of life* and *the light to the world* and *the gate for the sheep* . . . and more. We ought not be about the business of creating a Jesus who suits us, but, rather, coming to know the Jesus revealed to us in Scripture and testified to by the fellowship of believers. It is this Jesus who leads us to the cross and onward to resurrection and life everlasting.

## The Son of Man

As you read through John's gospel, you will find that Jesus refers to himself repeatedly as the "Son of Man." At the end of chapter 1, Nathaniel is astounded that Jesus saw him praying under a fig tree when Jesus was nowhere around. But Jesus tells Nathaniel that he will see "far greater things than these . . . you will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). Using powerful imagery from the story of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:10-22) and from Daniel 7, Jesus tells Nathaniel all that he needs to know to grasp what he will soon see and hear and experience as Jesus' disciple.

Because we proclaim Jesus to be fully God and fully human, it is understandable that we often take "Son of Man" to be a statement about Jesus' humanity, making "Son of God" a statement about Jesus' divinity. But "Son of Man" is not a cryptic way of saying that Jesus is human. Rather, it is a powerful image drawn from Daniel 7:13-14.

The book of Daniel was very popular and influential in Jesus' day, for good reason. Daniel is about the faithfulness of God toward those who remain faithful to God in the face of intimidation and threats. Daniel is set in Babylon during the exile. Daniel and his friends refuse to accommodate their faith in the LORD God to the culture and religion of the Babylonians. They stay resolute. Through God's intervention, Daniel's friends are rescued from the fiery furnace and Daniel isn't eaten by lions after being tossed in their den.

The Romans were the "Babylonians" of first-century Judea. It was Roman soldiers who stood guard over the temple during the big Jewish festivals. It was Roman governors who desecrated the temple from time to time. The question for the first-century Jews is whether they would assimilate into the larger Greco-Roman world around them or would they, like Daniel, stand strong in their unique identity as the people of God.

The "Son of Man" is found in Daniel 7. The chapter opens with dramatic images of all those who threaten Israel. These opponents are monsters rising up from the sea of chaos. But in v. 13-14, we meet the "Son of Man" (regrettably translated "one like a human being" in the NRSV, thereby obscuring the connection to Jesus' use in the gospels). This Son of Man is Israel's rescuer and vindicator. The Son of Man comes before the Ancient One (God) to be given dominion over all creation.

By referring to himself as the Son of Man, Jesus reveals that he is Israel's rescuer and that he is Lord and master of the cosmos.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

"I am the gate for the sheep." The third of Jesus' seven well-known "I am . . ." statements. Where does safety lie? Through the gate called Jesus. How can we find the abundant life, the green pastures, we so desire? Through the gate called Jesus. It is he who has come that we might have life and have it abundantly (10:10).

Jesus doesn't dance around the question. There is only one gateway into the presence of God and that is Jesus himself. This foreshadows a later statement of Jesus: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:1). There is only one gate into the kingdom: Jesus.

But we live in a world that offers us so many other ways. I'm sure you've tried some; I have. You might make a top ten list of other gateways to salvation and abundance that have been offered to you. Toys, for example. Surely you've seen the bumper sticker: "Whoever dies with the most toys wins!" Really? How about hard work? Sure, try earning your way into those green pastures. Or . . . a fuzzy, cuddly spirituality that asks nothing of us other than our embrace of our own "divine spark." When you've finished your top ten list, ask yourself these questions: What do these supposed "gates" or paths have in common? How many are focused upon the much beloved "I"? How many have already been proved false in your own experience?

## 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. In 2007, the Lenten sermon series was drawn from John's Gospel. We read through the Gospel that year and the daily readings for this Lent will again take us through the entire Gospel.

<p><b>Monday, John 6:1-21</b> Jesus feeds thousands (it is five thousand men) with a few loaves and fishes and he walks on water. What does the miracle of the feeding have in common with our practice of Holy Communion?</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, John 6:22-71</b> Jesus takes the OT imagery of God's feeding his people and reshapes it around himself. It will be helpful to read Exodus 16. Why do people reject Jesus? He is even abandoned by some of his followers!</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, John 7:1-24</b> Chapter 7 is a series of episodes depicting the rising opposition to Jesus. How bad do things get? Find three statements by Jesus that you think many of the people would have found most upsetting.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, John 7:25-52</b> Why do people think Jesus can't be the Messiah? Why don't the temple police arrest Jesus? It is important to see how much Jesus' messiahship differs from the people's expectations.</p>
<p><b>Friday, John 8:1-11</b> The Pharisees bring a woman before Jesus on charges of adultery. What do you think this story is about? Is it a morality play?</p>	<p><b>Saturday, John 8:12-20</b> To whom is Jesus speaking when he claims to be the "light of the world?" In Jewish law, two witnesses are needed. Who is Jesus' second witness?</p>

