

John 10:1-21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] John chapter 10 verses 1 to 21. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.

But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens, the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.

This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus again said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.

All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.

[1 : 06] The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me. Just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father.

And I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.

So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me.

[2 : 05] But I lay it down, of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. There was again a division among the Jews because of these words.

Many of them said, He has a demon, and is insane. Why listen to him? Others said, These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?

When reading John chapter 10, it is important that we do not detach it from that which precedes it. It is still a response to the Pharisees and the leaders of the Jews after the healing of the blind man.

In casting the formerly blind man out of the synagogue, the Jews were claiming authority over the flock of God, acting as false shepherds. And this is the background for the conversation that Jesus has, describing himself as the shepherd and the door to the sheep.

And some of the themes being explored here are ecclesiological themes, themes that relate to the church as the flock of Christ. The imagery of sheep and shepherding comes to the surface here, but it is not the only time within the Gospel that we see this.

[3 : 15] In chapter 1 we see it as Jesus is the Lamb. In chapter 21, where Jesus tells Peter to feed his sheep. And here he is the shepherd and the door to the sheep.

The biblical background to shepherd imagery is immensely important. Israel descended from shepherds. If you think about characters like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, these were all shepherds. Joseph was a shepherd. The great leaders of the nation, Moses and David, were shepherds, both literally and symbolically. Moses led the people out with his shepherd's rod, and David was the great shepherd of the house of Israel.

In passages like Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23 verses 1-4, the unfaithful shepherds, the unfaithful rulers of Israel were condemned. Elsewhere we see God himself being described as the great shepherd of his people in places like Psalm 23.

In this chapter Jesus alludes to verses such as Micah 2 verses 12-13. I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob. I will gather the remnant of Israel.

[4 : 21] I will set them together like a sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture, a noisy multitude of men. He who opens the breach goes up before them. They break through and pass the gate, going out by it.

Their king passes on before them, the Lord at their head. God's flock is gathered together and led out by the gate. Christ calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

This might be seen as an image of the Exodus. Remember that the Exodus is described as the leading of a flock out of Egypt with the rod of the shepherd Moses. That imagery is used in places like Isaiah chapter 63 verses 11-12, Psalm 77 verse 20 and elsewhere.

There's a striking of the false shepherd of Pharaoh. This sort of shepherd imagery might also help us to understand other episodes within the gospel. In chapters 5 and 6, for instance.

In chapter 5, Jesus meets a lame man near the sheep gate, bringing him back into the temple fold of Israel. Jesus here describes himself as the true door for the sheep.

[5 : 26] In chapter 6, Jesus leads a large multitude out like a flock across the sea and provides them with food. There's a strange detail in chapter 6 verse 10. There was much grass in the place.

Now why point that out? In chapter 10 verse 9, we see a suggestion of an answer. He will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. Who is the doorkeeper or the watchman?

In verse 3, it's probably the faithful leader of the people in contrast to the Jewish leaders and the Pharisees. The biblical imagery of the shepherd, as we've seen already, is fairly deeply rooted within the text.

But the shepherd is a rough and violent figure often. Not especially like our vision of shepherds. When we hear about shepherds, we might think about idyllic scenes, bucolic landscapes in the Lakeland in England, or we might think about these very tame pastoral settings.

But yet, that's not what we find in scripture. The shepherd is often a figure who struggles with wolves, with wild beasts, with thieves and bandits, and with the perils of the wilderness.

[6 : 35] He's associated with death and conflict and difficulty. We need to measure our concepts of pastoral ministry against biblical models. If we think about the pastoral ministry, we're often thinking about that very domestic, idyllic scene and the way that the shepherd is just this gentle, kind, tender figure.

And there's certainly that aspect of tenderness and gentleness with the flock. But the shepherd also has to be a conflictual character, able to drive off wolves, protect the flock, give safe and good pasture, someone who's able to suffer hardship and die for the sake of the flock.

The flock is in dangerous territory and we need tough and dedicated leaders. Now, there's an allusion to Numbers chapter 27, verses 15 to 17 here. In that place, Joshua is established as the leader of the people in replacement of Moses.

And there's a reference to coming in and going out there. Moses spoke to the Lord saying, Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be a sheep that have no shepherd.

Christ refers to the people of Israel as like sheep without a shepherd on a number of occasions. And he is the true shepherd. Jesus' use of the terminology, I am at this point, also relates his identity to that of God.

[8 : 05] He is not just the great Davidic leader. He is God himself come to deliver his people. One of the primary points of this section is to highlight the intimate relationship between sheep and shepherd.

The sheep have been given into Christ's hand by his father. He calls them all by name. They know and respond to his voice. You can maybe think of Mary Magdalene in chapter 20 verse 16.

It is when Jesus calls her by name that she recognizes his voice. In chapter 5 verse 25, there is another example of a parallel. The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

Lazarus is a further example. Even the grave cannot prevent the sheep from hearing their shepherd's voice. And the true shepherd is someone who will lay down his life for the sheep. Unlike the hired hand, we can think about the Jewish leaders, we can think about the Pharisees.

These are not going to lay down their lives for the people. But the true shepherd will. Jesus here speaks also of forming a larger flock. A flock that involves other sheep from elsewhere.

[9 : 13] Jesus brings in the Samaritans. He will bring in Gentile sheep. He will form one new flock of both Jews and Gentiles. And the church is very much in view in this imagery.

Remember again that the background of this is someone who has been cast out of the synagogue. Someone who is a paradigmatic believer or disciple. Someone who has been delivered by Christ, given new sight, brought through the healing waters, and made part of a new people.

He is cast out of the old people, but now he is going to be part of a new flock. And Christ is forming this new flock around himself at this time. It is profoundly encouraging to reflect upon the fact that the Father commits us as his sheep into the hands of his Son, the true shepherd.

And no predator can snatch us from his protection, nor from that of the Father. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. This is the image that is presented in this chapter, that Christ is the true leader of his people.

But not just this grand shepherd operating on a great scale, but one who has an intimate love and knowledge and commitment to his sheep. One who will lay down his life for his sheep.

[10 : 26] One who has that intimate connection that his sheep know his voice, and he can address each one of them by name. This is a deep and intimate connection. Not just the connection that we might associate with a king or a lordly ruler over a great nation, but one who has an intimate connection with those who are his own.

A question to reflect upon. Jesus makes a startling statement in verse 17, and the logic of it is worth reflecting upon and thinking about. I lay down my life that I may take it up again.

What is the logic of that statement, and how does it better help us to understand the death and the resurrection of Christ?