
The Wise Sheep

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 30 April 2023

Acts 2:42-47 • 1 Peter 2:19-25 • John 10:1-10



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today's passage from John's Gospel is well-known. The image of the shepherd, and especially the Good Shepherd, is often used when describing Jesus. It is an image which emphasises our own humility, and our status as servants. As Christians, we serve Jesus. He is our Lord. We know him and he knows us. We are the wise sheep, who know their own shepherd.

Jesus tells the disciples that he is the gate for the sheep. All his listeners would know about sheep and shepherding, even the fishermen, for Judea was a pastoral country, and the plateau near Jerusalem was dotted with sheep. Jesus tells them through this parable that he will care for them as a shepherd cares for his sheep. He protects them by serving as their guardian, particularly in dangerous times such as nighttime, when the sheep are gathered together in a pen and the shepherd guards the door. Jesus is the door. He says, "Whoever enters by me will be saved." The converse is also true: whoever does not enter

by Jesus will not be saved. In part, this is another way of saying what he says in John 14: “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). This statement causes a lot of controversy, especially among non-Christians. For a Christian to claim that only through Jesus Christ may we reach God and attain eternal life seems to some people to be too exclusive. What about other religions? Don’t we all — Jews, Muslims, Christians — worship the same God? Will only Christians be saved?

There is only one God, and Jesus is God’s Son, who was sent by God to show us the path to salvation. That is the truth, as we know it from the Bible. We must receive our salvation from God through Jesus Christ. If this troubles you because you feel that too many people are left out, then consider another aspect of this truth. Jesus is not excluding people, but including them. Our Bible tells us that before Jesus came to earth, suffered and died, rose again and sent the Holy Spirit to be our advocate, no one came to the Father. No one. Only since Jesus’ ordeal and triumph have we had a way to be saved. And Jesus is that way. So what Jesus did was to make it possible for all people to live forever in his care. Simon Peter speaks of this when he addresses the crowds near the beginning of Acts:

Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day ... David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, “He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.” (Acts 2:29, 31)

David was not raised from the dead — he died and was buried and that was the end for him. But for us, it is different, thanks to Jesus Christ. Thanks to Jesus, we may, through faith and the grace and free gift of God, be raised again after our earthly death. So when Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” he is also saying that because of him, because of his sacrificial action, his death and resurrection, we have a way to come to the Father. Jesus is the way; Jesus is the gate for us all.

Jesus cares for us and protects us, as the shepherd does the sheep. But this is not a guarantee of a trouble-free life. We will still suffer harm, pain, misfortune. William Barclay writes that the shepherd in Jesus’ time, as he put the sheep into the pen for the night, would check each sheep for any injury or illness. That care of the individual sheep is another aspect of Jesus’ love for us. Injury will happen — but we have Jesus to turn to when it does. When we turn to Jesus in prayer in our times of distress, two things happen: we will receive comfort and we will draw closer to God because of the trust and faith we feel and express.

Sometimes we find it hard to accept God’s comfort when something really bad happens — the loss of a child or a dear friend, or a terrible accident or injury. At those times we may doubt what we believe or even lose our faith for a time.

Just as it may be difficult for us to talk about what has happened even with a close friend or family member, it may be hard to talk to God. We may feel that God is absent from our lives, or has turned away from us. But truly, even though we may not always feel it, God's love is reaching out to us. God's heart will reach ours. When we are ready, God's love and comfort will be there — for they were never really absent — God was always there for us to hold onto.

And when we are ready, we will know God's voice again, the voice of the shepherd who calls to us, guiding us to green pastures and a safe place to sleep. We know the voice of the shepherd. For us that means we must be careful about those who will speak against the Gospel. There have been false prophets in every age, including this one: people who will deny the truth of the Bible or the resurrection of Jesus, or tell us that our hope must be in some other person. We must not follow them, for they speak not out of love for us, as Jesus does, but out of selfish or self-deluded motives. The foolish sheep follow anyone who speaks loudly and convincingly; the wise sheep follow only the true Shepherd's voice. Listen — and follow our true shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.