

July 14-18, 2025 Edition

Following
The Year(s) Of Jesus Part 184

I Am The Good Shepherd

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

I am the good shepherd. John 10:11 (NLT)

Reflection: As we continue looking at Who Jesus claimed to be I am constantly amazed at just how outrageous His claims must have seemed to the people He was speaking to. Especially as I watch the video clips from the John Visual Bible (available to watch anytime on YouTube and I don't get a percentage of any revenue generated from you watching it... it's just a good movie ;o) where Jesus says things like, "I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the gate; I am the Good Shepherd.

It's one thing to read these statements in a book 2,000 years later in a culture that has been thoroughly influenced by the teachings and ethics of this man named Jesus. It's another to put myself in the place of the people of first century Israel and imagine hearing some guy make these claims as he walks through my city.

And this "I am" statement that we are going to look at this week is special. It's unique among all the other 7 "I Am" statements of Jesus in that this one is personal. In all the other "I am" statements Jesus compares Himself to inanimate objects or concepts. Here he gets personal. He is a shepherd and we are His sheep. And the people who heard Him would have immediately gotten a picture of what He was talking about. People in the first century knew what a shepherd did. They knew all about sheep. And what's fascinating to me about this is, they weren't impressed. Not only does this metaphor (I am the Good Shepherd) have unflattering implications to us (if He's the Shepherd then what does that make us?) but shepherds themselves were questionable characters in the eyes of the people of first century Israel.

There were only two classes of citizens in Israel who were not allowed to testify in first century courts. Women and shepherds. In the eyes of the culture of Israel neither women nor shepherds could be trusted to testify honestly and coherently (imagine what it must have been like for female shepherds... or would they be shepherdesses? The mind boggles ;o)

This is an amazing turn of events in a culture whose greatest heroes were shepherds themselves. Abel was a shepherd. Abraham was a shepherd. So were Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, King David... these were the greatest heroes of Israel and yet by the time the first century rolls around shepherds are considered to be the scum of the earth. Only tax collectors and other disreputable sinners were lower on the rungs of the culture of Jesus' day. And here is Jesus in John chapter 10 saying proudly that He is the Good Shepherd. That's kind of strange.

But everyone knew how shepherds felt about their sheep. Jesus' analogy is doing two things at once: giving the people a picture that will make sense to them and tearing down divisions and prejudices which is another big part of what He came to do.

This metaphor of the Good Shepherd shows us how he feels about us. This analogy may give us a greater insight into the inner psychology of God than any other in the Bible. Tomorrow we'll talk more about that but for today, spend some time thinking about why Jesus would use a metaphor that automatically made the people of His day look upon Him with suspicion and confusion.

Tuesday:

I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me. John 10:14 (NLT)

The Lord is my shepherd. Psalm 23:1 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... so Jesus is the Good Shepherd and that makes me a sheep. What exactly does that mean. Well, a couple of things actually that we'll spend this week focusing on.

One thing it means is that Jesus knows me. I mean He REALLY knows me. Jesus makes this statement in John chapter 10 but if we don't understand the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep we might miss the significance.

Most of us have seen flocks of sheep, if not in person I imagine you've seen movies. Sheep dogs run around and herd the sheep (or pigs in the case of one of my favorite movies of all time... Babe was one of the first non-cartoons that Jonathan would want to watch over and over so I became deeply knowledgeable about the herding of sheep). The dogs snap and snarl and drive the sheep to where the shepherd wants them to go.

That is not the picture the people of Israel would have gotten when Jesus talks about sheep and shepherding. Western shepherding uses the dogs and the concept of driving the sheep. Bending them to the will of the shepherd (which Babe will tell you doesn't work nearly as well as asking nicely and learning the sheep's secret password- bah ram u!). That is not the picture of eastern shepherding.

In the middle east, shepherds don't drive their sheep, they lead them. The sheep become familiar with the shepherd's voice and will follow wherever the shepherd leads. In fact, if a shepherd wants a day off it wouldn't work to just switch shepherds for the day. The sheep wouldn't follow the new shepherd... they didn't recognize his voice. Instead if a shepherd needed to leave, the new shepherd would have to come in a few days early and work with the familiar shepherd. Then when the old shepherd left, the sheep recognized the voice of the new shepherd and would follow him instead of running away. I've never actually watched it happen but I've seen lessons by shepherds who described it and it seems amazing to me.

And not only do the sheep know the shepherds voice... the shepherd learns to know his sheep. In fact whenever a flock is grazing a shepherd has to be in a place where he has all the sheep in view at all times. Not only because of predators (which we'll talk about tomorrow) but because each sheep has its own unique personality. Over time a shepherd will come to learn those unique qualities which will allow the shepherd to care for the sheep properly. To watch individual sheep when certain situations arose. To watch that one lamb that tended to wander off, not because it intended to but because it was just a little more clueless than the rest of the flock.

Doug McMillan is a pastor who used to be a shepherd. And he tells a story about one time when he was on a train with another friend of his who was also a shepherd. His friend had sold a few of his sheep a couple of months before that and as they were riding along on the train they passed an open field with a flock of sheep in it. That's when Doug McMillan's

friend looked out as the window as the train was going by this field and got very excited and grabbed Doug by the arm and said, "look there's four of my lambs!"

Now we would hear that story and think, sure... you recognize your lambs (along with the sarcastic eyeroll) but Doug McMillan having been a shepherd said he had no doubt that his friend truly recognized his lambs. It's a quality unique among shepherds. It's a quality Jesus has with His sheep. How does it feel to be known?

Wednesday:

He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. Psalm 23:2-3 (NLT)

Reflection: So we finished yesterday talking about the reality that Jesus as our Good Shepherd knows us and I asked you, how does it feel to be known?

Feels pretty good until we start to realize all the bad stuff inside me that I try to keep hidden from everyone else, and sometimes even from myself. If Jesus knows me the way a shepherd knows his sheep then there isn't a part of myself that He doesn't know. The shepherd had to know his sheep that well. Why? Well it isn't going to feel good at first thinking about how this relates to me and you.

The shepherd has to know the sheep so well because the sheep NEED to be known in order to survive. Sheep are the most hopeless, helpless and hapless domesticated animals that there are. They need a shepherd just to survive.

Think about it. Have you ever seen a wild flock of sheep roaming the plains footloose and fancy free? I'm not talking about Rocky Mountain Big Horn sheep or Dall sheep like we have up here in Alaska. I'm talking about wooly little quadrupeds that look so cute and do nothing but eat, sleep and say "baaaaa" all day long. No, you've never seen a herd of wild sheep. Why not? Because they are completely helpless. They're not fast, they're not tough and they have no defense against even the most wimpy of predators.

Sheep are also stupid. The reason the 23rd Psalm talks about the shepherd making it possible for the sheep to rest in green pastures and be led by quiet streams is because the sheep would never do that otherwise. They don't know when to rest, they don't know when to move on their own. If the shepherd didn't lead them by quiet waters they would have some serious problems.

As soon as a sheep gets to water it wades out into the water and starts drinking. That's not a problem, even in fast moving water... at first. But as their wool gets saturated they become heavier and heavier and soon they go from drinking happily to being swept away downriver as they can no longer handle the added weight of their saturated wool.

Aren't we the same? We don't like to think of ourselves as hopeless, helpless and hapless but we are. We just are blind to it, just like the sheep. We don't know when to rest. We don't know what the best thing to do is. We're uncertain about when to move, when to stay, who to date/marry, when to have kids, what should I do with my life?

I could go on and on. What Jesus is saying is that spiritually, we are as hopeless, helpless and hapless as sheep are. There are untold snares, traps and predators that will keep us from the life that the Good Shepherd wants us to have. Turns out we need a shepherd to survive but we bristle at that thought. We don't want anyone telling us what to do. We are unsure and afraid of where some other master may lead us. It terrifies us. Maybe that's why Jesus says He's the "Good" Shepherd. Not only will He lead us to where we need to go, but He will sacrifice His own life for ours. More on that tomorrow.

Thursday:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. John 10:11 (NLT)

No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again. John 10:18 (NLT)

Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! John 1:29 (NLT)

But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all. He was oppressed and treated harshly, He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. Isaiah 53:5-7 (NLT)

Reflection: The Good Shepherd sacrifices His own life for the sheep. Nobody takes His life from Him... He gives up His life voluntarily. He dies for the sheep. This is absolutely fascinating to me. Because at this point in John chapter 10 Jesus starts to burst through the metaphor that He's been using.

It's already been confusing enough, hasn't it? In this one chapter and one story Jesus gives us all kinds of metaphors: Shepherd; gate; gate keeper; sheep pen; sheep; thieves & robbers.

And Jesus immediately claims two of the metaphors from Himself. The Gate & the Good Shepherd. How can He be both at once? How can He be the Gate through which the sheep enter into salvation, stability and eternal life (if you want to read more about that we talked in detail about it in last week's devos... go back and read them) but He's also the Good Shepherd who leads, guides, protects and dies for the sheep.

How is that possible?

Well, Jesus does this all the time. He bursts all of our ideas about how metaphors work by claiming for Himself what I guess you could call "paired polarity" metaphors. Metaphors that are opposite extremes of each other but Jesus is both of them at the same time. The first will be last the last will be first. How is that possible? One person can't be first and last at the same time. Jesus says, "just watch Me!" The same goes from when Jesus says, "the greatest will be the servant of all and the servant of all will be the greatest."

And now in John chapter 10 we see Jesus breaking out of the Good Shepherd metaphor and saying that He is going to die for the sheep. In other words, the shepherd will become a sacrificial lamb slain for the sins of the sheep?

Exactly.

Huh?

Way back in Isaiah 53 God gives us a hint at what would happen with the messiah. He would be the conquering King. The Lion of Judah Who would trample His enemies under his feet. But He would also be the suffering servant whose sacrifice would take away the sins of sheep.

The Good Shepherd would become the sacrificial lamb.

Only with Jesus He only looked like a sheep. In reality what looked like weakness was actually the greatest display of spiritual power this universe has ever seen. And what's wild is, He told everyone what He was going to do and nobody could stop Him.

When I was 8 years old a movie came out called Billy Jack. Every kid on my block wanted to be Billy Jack. He was a Green Beret special forces karate kind of guy. And the most memorable scene in the whole movie was when Billy Jack told a guy he was standing right in front of, I'm gonna take my right leg and wop you on the the right side of your face and you can't do a thing to stop it. The guy doesn't believe him and the next thing you know he's on the ground rubbing the right side of his face.

That's sort of what Jesus does. He tells everyone who'll listen that they're going to kill Him, put in the grave for 3 days but that after that three days He's coming out of the tomb and there's nothing anyone could do to stop Him.

And then He does it. And I picture Satan and the forces of darkness lying on the ground on that resurrection Sunday rubbing the right side of their collective faces wondering what happened?

I'll tell you what happened... the Good Shepherd became a sheep so His lambs wouldn't have to die themselves. He is continually bursting every metaphor that can be applied to Him.

But what's amazing... is that He gives us the power to do the same thing. To burst through every metaphor ever applied to us. Which leads to the final point for today...

Friday:

The sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. John 10:3 (NLT)

Reflection: Yes... being compared to a sheep is not terribly flattering in one way. Sheep are stupid, they're helpless, hopeless and hapless. That's where we start out and to a certain extent we will struggle with those weaknesses as long as live on this earth... but there's also a sense in which following the Good Shepherd allows us to break out of the metaphor applied to us... helpless, hopeless and hapless sheep... and become something greater than mere sheep.

The sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. John 10:3 (NLT)

He calls His own sheep by name. What does that mean? Well, I may be reading too much into this but I don't think so. When Jesus names us, He tells us who we are. And not just who we are at the moment... but who we were created to become. He gives us not just an identity but a destiny linked with that identity.

The same way that Jesus bursts through the metaphor of the Good Shepherd and becomes the lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world in John chapter 10, we are shown our possible future in Psalm 23.

The 23rd Psalm starts out talking about how we are sheep. It reminds us that we are helpless, hopeless and hapless. It lays out why we need a shepherd and what exactly the shepherd does for us. But then it breaks us out of the sheep metaphor into something else. Look what happens in verse 5:

You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Psalm 23:5 (NLT)

Suddenly the language is not that of a shepherd caring for dumb animals but of a prophet commissioning a king or another prophet. Anointing someone's head with oil was a sign of an appointment... in this case a divine appointment. And as we enter into our God given identity that the shepherd has shown us our own cups overflow with blessings and life and more life.

We are invited to break out of one divine identity defined by the metaphor of a sheep and into a whole new identity defined by the metaphor of a shepherd. Every single one of us has been designed to become a shepherd in the mold of the Good Shepherd. How does it happen?

Well, as we follow the Good Shepherd and live our lives with Him we learn by how He treats us, how to treat others. We learn how to treat people with the love, acceptance and forgiveness of the Good Shepherd by living within that atmosphere ourselves. And then, when we are ready, the Good Shepherd will send lost lambs into our paths so we can treat them the way the Good Shepherd treats us. By living our lives with the three signs that defined Jesus' ministry on this earth, Everybody's Welcome, Nobody's Perfect and Anything's Possible.

You attract lost lambs the exact same way the Good Shepherd attracted you. You value them irrationally, you serve them unconditionally, and you love them extravagantly.

1 Corinthians 13 is the love chapter. It's a picture of how Jesus loves us. In it Paul talks about what love looks like. He dreams of how things will be when Jesus finally calls His flock of sheep/shepherds home. And then Paul ends with these words:

But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly.

1 Corinthians 13:13 (NLT)

Love extravagantly. I love that idea. What would that even look like in my life? What would it mean if I decided that tomorrow when I wake up I was going to do my best to love the lost lambs that God brings me across extravagantly?

What a great idea to ponder. You have an identity that the Good Shepherd has given you. That identity is also your destiny, your mission should you choose to accept it. You can stay only a sheep for the rest of your life. Or... you can learn how to break out of that metaphor into your God given destiny and identity by following the Good Shepherd yourself and learning what it means to be loved extravagantly and so what it means to love extravagantly.

You know, really church is nothing more than a big recovery program for sheep. There are, in the most simple terms I can think of, only 3 steps.

First step, recognize I'm a sheep.

Second step, learn to follow the Good Shepherd and see/feel what extravagant love looks like.

Third step, become a shepherd yourself, loving others extravagantly, while you continue to work out what it means to follow the Good Shepherd and be loved extravagantly.

Hi everybody, I'm Ed and I'm a sheep. And so are you... whether you recognize it yet or not. Follow the Good Shepherd and discover who you were created to become.