



Sheep, Shepherds and the Great Shepherd (John 21:15-19 and Acts 20:28-32)

Growing up in the city makes many of the images from the Bible difficult for me to understand. I don't know how farming works or about vineyards or raising sheep and goats. So many of the natural connections the people during biblical times can understand are distant to and lost on me. What does it mean when God calls the people of Israel His "vineyard" (Isa 5, Ps 80)? What does it mean when Jesus says, "I am the vine, and you are the branches" (Jn 15:5-6), or when we hear, "The Lord is my Shepherd" (Ps 23:1)? Does that make us sheep?

Obviously, it does.

You and I are sheep. That's what the Bible calls us. But what does it mean? It helps to understand what aspects or characteristics of sheep the Bible is referring to. One of the most powerful similarities is the sheep's tendency to wander. The Bible clearly teaches that we are all like sheep and have gone astray (Is 53:6). This is a natural tendency for sheep. There have been many reported cases of sheep wandering off and getting lost and tragic incidents where sheep have carelessly wandered off cliffs to their collective death. They did this by recklessly following one another into danger and ultimately paying for their foolishness with their lives. That is why sheep need a shepherd.

Obviously, they do.

Sheep are also vulnerable. The Bible describes sheep as being in danger from wolves and susceptible to attack (Matt 7:15). That is why *the rod* of the Great Shepherd brings comfort to the sheep (Ps 23:4). The shepherd is there to protect them because they cannot protect themselves. They require care and benefit significantly from being led to green pastures (Ps 23:2). Unlike many animals, it is almost impossible for them to clean themselves and care for their health. The picture that most of us have in our mind of a sheep is fluffy and white. But in reality, their wool is matted and dirty. After shearing, it is a lengthy and challenging process to make their wool white again. (Think theologically about that!) Protection and care are what good shepherds provide for their sheep. That is why sheep need Shepherds.

It is so obvious that they do.

But not everyone is a sheep. The Bible does not refer to humanity as sheep. It is a metaphor for those under God's specific care, for his people, Israel. This metaphor is picked up by Jesus for His followers. The comparison is further underlined in the teachings of Peter and Paul for the Church.

To continue using biblical imagery, there are sheep and there are goats. Jesus, in one of His parables of judgment at the end of Matthew's gospel (Matt 25:31-46), warns of a time when sheep and goats will be separated for

judgment. The sheep are those who hear His voice and respond. The goats are those who are not His and have not responded with faith to His words. To assume that you are a sheep because you were made in God's image (Gen 1:26-27) is not true and is a dangerous assumption. The sheep follow the Shepherd and, by their proximity to Him, are protected and cared for. They are kept from danger because they follow His lead. When they stray, the Great Shepherd pursues them and brings them back joyfully.

Can goats become sheep? This is not a question answered by biology but by theology. Yes. The Good News is found in the Gospel. Goats can become sheep by faithfully trusting the Great Shepherd.

But God's care for us extends further and deeper than His Word and Spirit. God has provided shepherds for His sheep from among them. Some sheep are also shepherds. Like the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11-21), these shepherds love the sheep and care for them and protect them. This is the direction we read about when Jesus restores Peter to Himself (Jn 21). He doesn't just forgive Peter but assigns him the joy and burden of sharing in the ministry of shepherding God's sheep. Three times He tells him to care for His sheep (Jn 21:16, 17, 18).

When Paul says goodbye to the Ephesian Elders on the island of Miletus, he charges them to shepherd those under their care (Acts 20:28). He reminds them of his example and commands them to continue this ministry. Paul reminds them of the importance of the Word of God that will guide them as they shepherd God's people. He warns that wolves are not as evident in the spiritual world as in the physical one. Spiritual discernment is necessary. Wolves, in the very real spiritual world, can look like sheep. And therefore, the leaders, specifically the Elders of the Church, need to courageously and consistently protect the sheep from wolves. Even well-intended wolves lead people astray and directly back into God's judgment.

Isn't it good to know that the Bible speaks the truth about us? It knows before we do that we are vulnerable and incapable of caring for ourselves. The words of God give instruction to lead us and remind us of the Great Shepherd who leads us to "quiet waters and restores our soul" (Ps 23:2). Moments, or longer, when we find ourselves fearful because of the shadow of death, we "fear no danger" because the Great Shepherd is with us (Ps 23:3). It is good to know there are shepherds among us like Peter and Paul. These God-ordained shepherds model Jesus for us and lovingly discipline us so that we will hear from the Great Shepherd himself, "Well done, my good and faithful sheep!"

Discussion

1. What do you think about when you compare yourself to a sheep? Are you prone to wander? Do you recognize how desperately you need God's care?
2. Read Acts 20:28-32. How concerned are you with wolves in sheep's clothing? Does it seem like an archaic way to consider people? How important is it that our Elders protect us from heresy and its damnable power?
3. How regularly do you pray for our Elders? What should you pray for?
4. How has this particular lesson encouraged, strengthened, confronted, or challenged you?

Our Corporate Prayer

Great Shepherd, we thank you for your protection and care. We humbly admit it is easy to wander and stray away from you and your wise instruction. We thank you for your patience and persistence in the way you seek us and find us and bring us back to you. Also thank you for providing shepherds, under your direction, to lead us. Help us to trust you by trusting them. Empower us to love you by loving them. In a world of cynicism and skepticism of authority, temper our spirits to respond to our Elders in submission. Give our shepherds the strength to lead us courageously and the discernment to discipline us lovingly. We ask all this in the name of our Good Shepherd, Jesus. Amen.