

John 10 the Good Shepherd

It's a sad thing but we simply can't trust everyone out there.

Some are only interested in what they can get out of us. They will ruthlessly abuse us for their own twisted pleasure or gain. Others will serve coldly, only in it for the money and quickly disappear when it no longer suits them. Even among people we rub shoulders with in the practise of religion, Jesus says there may be wolves, thieves and robbers and people who are supposed to look after us but abandon us at the first hint of trouble!

Behind the respectable veneer, the Lord knew most of the Pharisees were busy slandering and plotting murder so they could hold onto the limited control and privilege they enjoyed. Like the Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah before Him, Jesus warned His listeners against corrupt 'shepherds'. Sometimes those entrusted with leading, protecting and providing for God's people are in fact false, dishonourable and self-interested.

But Jesus goes further. He offers people of faith a Shepherd we *can* trust and gladly follow. By contrast with the Pharisees who excommunicated the blind man Jesus had healed and would have callously stoned a woman to death just to get Jesus in trouble, our Master promises to look after us as the '*Good Shepherd*'.

This is a strong term, 'Good Shepherd'. We know from elsewhere in the Gospels 1st century Jews would never call another human being 'good', this was a word reserved for describing God Himself. And everyone knew and loved (as we do) the famous 23rd Psalm, where King David, once a shepherd boy himself declared, 'The *Lord* is my Shepherd!' Jesus is again identifying Himself with God and with this image emphasizing that our Creator is a compassionate and caring Father.

Sheep are not the most resourceful creatures. They are inclined to be harassed and helpless and get lost. When Jesus speaks in these terms his listeners would nod and agree with His description. In the open country sheep were highly vulnerable.

But the good Shepherd cares for His flock, He knows each one by name, no one is more concerned for their welfare than Him. Christians have the Lord Jesus as our Shepherd, we will not be in want, we will lack no good thing.

He will lead His flock, where? To green pasture and still water. He will provide what is good and safe. Not scrawny brush but green grass. Not a rushing river where sheep could fall in and drown, but still pools where they can be refreshed and regain strength. Our souls are restored, renewed with the Bread of life and the water of life as Jesus fills us with His Spirit and the assurance of His grace.

With hearts nurtured by His promise of forgiveness and neverending love, we are motivated to follow in 'paths of righteousness'. We'll still be tempted but not be so enthusiastic about sinful activity but hunger and thirst for what is pure and wholesome and pleasing to God. We are gradually becoming less obsessed with our own agendas and more concerned to bring honour to His name. 'He guides us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.'

Even when we must, for reasons we may not completely understand, pass through difficult and challenging times, dark valleys of bereavement and loss which threaten to overwhelm us, we will not be alone. The Good Shepherd does not lead us any path He hasn't Himself walked. We'll see in another few chapters how for our sake He was willing to endure the most agonising torture and death.

When we are in the valley of shadow, we can reach out for Him, for He is with us and He knows this path well. We can lean on His staff for support, even His correcting rod of discipline is strangely comforting for with the Lord there is always mercy. We need not cower in fear of the evil one. We are ultimately in good hands, the best hands, hands scarred by love.

And even though we may have to face some enemies in this life, in the midst of all our 'trials and tribulations' we will know His generous provision. He 'prepares a table in the presence of our enemies'! The Apostle Paul was no stranger to persecution in New Testament times yet he could write, 'We are hard pressed on every side but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed.' (2 Corinthians 4 v 8-9) While certain humans may despise us, we know the anointing, overflowing blessing of God, we know the smile and favour of our Master and that means so much more!

David ends his psalm with this remarkable picture of the Shepherd in goodness and loving mercy 'following', *pursuing* us with relentless grace and kindness all our earthly days with a promise of a safe home with Him forever. When through our own foolish choices we become that lost sheep, He takes no rest but comes seeking and saving the lost.

These 1st century Jews knew this psalm as we do. They knew God in heaven was the great Shepherd of their nation. But now here is Jesus declaring, 'I am the Good Shepherd', come to lay down His life not just for Israel but for the world.

Jesus leads us and feeds and protects us from evil in the most profound way. Israel had large communal sheepfolds in the towns but also smaller, remote ones out in the country. If the flock couldn't make the town by nightfall they could take refuge in one of these. They were simple rings of stones with no gate. The Shepherd lay down across the opening. He became the door. No wolf or robber would get through Him, but His sheep who responded to His call and followed Him came in and out and enjoyed pasture, safe and free.

Jesus, God the Son, came in the flesh as the Good Shepherd and laid down His life that all who trust in Him might enjoy life to the full and life that is eternal.

He's the Good Shepherd, of that there is no doubt. The only question is whether we are willing to follow and be His flock.