



The Gospel of John

Session 21: The Good Shepherd

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

In today's lesson, we'll examine two more of Jesus's seven "*I am*" statements: "*I am the Gate*" and "*I am the Good Shepherd*." The Old Testament is rich with references to sheep and shepherding. Ezekiel 34 is particularly poignant regarding God's condemnation of the wicked shepherds who led His people astray, and His promise to provide a Good Shepherd to care for and unite His people.

At the close of class, consider reading Psalm 23 aloud as a prayer prompt. Your group might discuss and share ways they recognize Jesus as their Good Shepherd, acknowledge His provision, and trust in His continued care. Some might share testimonies of how they have felt His presence in valleys, or the hope they have in eternal life with Him.

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

John 10:1-21

THE MAIN IDEA

Jesus is the Gate, the One who protects, and the Good Shepherd, the One who leads and ultimately lays down His life for His sheep.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How is Jesus both the Gate and the Good Shepherd for Christians? What does that mean for your life today?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

John 10:1-10 Jesus is the gate, or door, and thus the only way to eternal life. Not only did a gate protect the sheep from predators, but the shepherd himself often served as the gate, laying his body in the entrance to the sheep pen to protect from wild animals or thieves. Jesus is the gate through which all people must pass to inherit eternal life. He is also the source of our eternal security and the means through which we enjoy abundant life.

John 10:11-15 Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. He has authority to lay His life down and to pick it back up. He accomplished salvation on our behalf through His death, burial, and resurrection. When we come to know Jesus as our Good Shepherd, we learn to recognize His voice, follow His lead, and delight in His commands. He is altogether trustworthy.

John 10:16-21 Jesus's flock is expanding. Just as the Old Testament prophesied and Christ declared, He came to bring sheep from among the Gentiles into God's kingdom by faith in Christ. We serve Christ as we join His mission to make the gospel known to the ends of the earth.



START HERE

As you read today's passage, contrast Jesus's character with that of the thieves and robbers. When your defenses are low because of exhaustion, suffering, illness, or difficulty, what "thieves and robbers" stand at the gate wanting to get inside? How do Jesus's promises help you focus on Him over the things that seek to steal your faith and joy?

DISCUSS

Can you think of a time that Jesus offered you supernatural protection, like a strong gate, or tenderness like a Good Shepherd? How does past experience build your faith for whatever you are facing today?

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Jesus is the Gate—The Only Door to Life

John 10:1-10: *"Truly I tell you, anyone who doesn't enter the sheep pen by the gate but climbs in some other way is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought all his own outside, he goes ahead of them. The sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will never follow a stranger; instead, they will run away from him, because they don't know the voice of strangers." Jesus gave them this figure of speech, but they did not understand what He was telling them.*

Jesus said again, "Truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance."

Unpacking John 10:1-10

In first-century Israel, sheep were commonly kept in stone enclosures called sheepfolds or pens. These were often circular or rectangular structures made of stacked stone, with a single, narrow opening. In rural areas, multiple shepherds might bring their flocks into the communal pen at night. The enclosures often had no door at the opening. The shepherd himself would physically lie across the entrance, protecting the sheep from predators and thieves, and ensuring no one walked out. If a wolf tried to attack the flock, he would have to get past the shepherd first.

In today's passage, Jesus addressed a crowd that, based on verses 19-21, likely included some of the religious leaders. He began by contrasting Himself with "thieves and robbers." When a shepherd lay in the entrance to the sheepfold at night, He used his own body to protect the sheep from harm. If a predator or thief attempted to carry off part of the flock, the only way in would be to climb the stone walls of the enclosure—a risky and likely unproductive endeavor.



The thief was looking for quick access to satisfy selfish desires, while the shepherd looked after the welfare of the flock by offering himself as the ultimate protector and guardian.

In Old Testament times, false shepherds exploited God's people rather than protecting them. They lured them away from following God with false promises and minimizing sin. Over time, the "flock" of Israel was divided, exiled, and scattered. God told the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel that He would send someone to gather His flocks, pointing both to a temporary gathering in the days of the prophets, but ultimately pointing toward fulfillment in Christ.

In Jeremiah 23, the Lord spoke through the prophet, saying, *"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" This is the LORD's declaration. "Therefore, this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds who tend my people: You have scattered my flock, banished them, and have not attended to them. I am about to attend to you because of your evil acts"—this is the LORD's declaration.* ³ *"I will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands where I have banished them, and I will return them to their grazing land"* (Jeremiah 23:1-3).

Jeremiah looked forward to the day when, after seventy years of exile to Babylon, God would restore His people and allow them to return to Jerusalem. However, it is common for Old Testament prophesy to contain two meanings—immediate fulfillment in that time and ultimate fulfillment to come in Christ. God's word to the prophet also looked ahead to Jesus, in the family line of David, who would rescue God's people and unite Jews and Gentiles in His Kingdom.

Likewise, the prophet Ezekiel spoke out against the false teachers of his day who led the Israelites into sin and exile. *"This is what the Lord GOD says to the shepherds: Woe to the shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding themselves! Shouldn't the shepherds feed their flock? You eat the fat, wear the wool, and butcher the fattened animals, but you do not tend the flock. You have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bandaged the injured, brought back the strays, or sought the lost. Instead, you have ruled them with violence and cruelty. They were scattered for lack of a shepherd; they became food for all the wild animals when they were scattered. My flock went astray on all the mountains and every high hill. My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and there was no one searching or seeking for them"* (Ezekiel 34:2b-6).

In Jesus, the day had finally arrived when the lost sheep would be gathered, protected, and provided for. *"The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out"* (John 10:2-3). Unlike the false teachers and religious leaders, Jesus is a legitimate Shepherd who came to Israel to lead His people out of captivity and toward new life.

Jesus does not call His people through coercion or force. Sometimes multiple shepherds or flocks would share one enclosure for the night. When the shepherds needed to separate their flocks in the morning, they would leave the pen, and each would call his own sheep by name. Because they knew their shepherd's voice, the sheep would follow him. Sheep are not driven



out like cattle, with a rancher behind pushing them forward. Instead, they are led by a shepherd who goes before them to guide and protect.

Jesus said again, “Truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved” (John 10:7-9a). In this third “I Am” statement of Jesus, He declared that He is the Gate who provides access for the sheep. Salvation is not found through religious systems or leaders but through Christ. Scripture deems anyone who attempts to persuade individuals of another way to salvation is a thief or a liar. Jesus is the gate who provides access, and the one who calls the sheep to follow. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, *“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1b).*

In verse 9 Jesus said, *“I am the gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.”* Jesus gives His people freedom and protection. When we come to faith in Christ, we enjoy safety in relationship with God, we enjoy guidance as we follow Jesus our Shepherd, and we enjoy freedom to enjoy life fully, as God intended. Isaiah 40:10-11 says, *“See, the Lord GOD comes with strength, and his power establishes his rule. His wages are with him, and his reward accompanies him. He protects his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in the fold of his garment. He gently leads those that are nursing.”* When we know that we are in the hands of the Good Shepherd, we can follow Him out of the sheepfold and into uncertainty in the world, because He goes before us, promising to lead and protect us.

“A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance” (John 10:10). The false teachers and leaders who came before wounded and divided God’s people. The Pharisees promised God’s blessings but saddled the people with rules no one could keep (Matthew 23:4). Unlike the Old Testament prophets who pointed people toward Christ, the Pharisees—who had every reason to identify and follow Jesus—attempted to bypass Christ as the gate to entice people away from Jesus.

Spiritual theft is a serious matter. Paul warned the church in Galatia that if anyone preached a gospel other than Christ they should be cut off (Galatians 1:8-9). A teaching that rejects Christ’s resurrection should be rejected (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). We are not free from false teaching today. From cults that promise different means of salvation (even in Jesus’s name) to modern secularists who claim we are only responsible for ourselves, these liars and thieves seek to steal joy, kill faith, and destroy the witness of God’s people. When Paul warned the church against the enemies of Christ he said, *“Their end is destruction; their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame; and they are focused on earthly things. Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly wait for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:19-20).*

In contrast to the thieves and robbers who practiced false teaching and idolatry, stands Jesus—the One who came *“so that they may have life and have it in abundance” (John 10:10).* The gate is intended to keep robbers and thieves out as much it is meant to keep the sheep safe within. And there is only one gate—Christ. As John Stott wrote in his book, *The Cross of Christ*, “Jesus



does not offer to show us a door; He says *He is the door*. There is no access to God except through Him.” When we align our lives with Christ the Gate, and confess that He is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), we find safety and purpose in the One who gives abundant life.

DISCUSS

- What are some other ways Jesus is different than theological thieves and robbers?
- Where are you tempted to look for life apart from the gate of Christ?
- What does it look like to repeatedly “enter through” Christ rather than through your own efforts?

2. Jesus is the Good Shepherd—He Gathers and Protects His Flock

John 10:11-15: *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, since he is not the shepherd and doesn’t own the sheep, leaves them and runs away when he sees a wolf coming. The wolf then snatches and scatters them. This happens because he is a hired hand and doesn’t care about 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. I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Unpacking John 10:11-16

Shepherding was not romanticized in Jesus’s day; it was hard, dangerous work. Shepherds lived with their sheep, knew them individually, and called them by name. In the evenings, when the sheep would return to the pen, the shepherd would stand in the doorway, inspecting each sheep, applying oil or salve on their wounds, and checking them for injury. Because of the shepherd’s attentive care, the sheep knew his voice and followed his commands. Sheep did not respond to strangers’ voices. The intimacy and safety of that relationship was essential for survival.

Jesus continued with His fourth I am statement: *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”* (John 10:11). Not only did Jesus come to give us abundant life in His name, He also laid His life down to achieve access to that life for us! These words foreshadowed the cross. Jesus’s death was not accidental, nor was it completely due to the power and influence of the Pharisees. The shepherd’s job was to keep the sheep safe, even if that means risking his own life. Jesus’s death was an intentional sacrifice to achieve salvation for His people.

To get a glimpse into the danger of shepherding, consider 1 Samuel 17. David, then a teenager, explained to King Saul why he had confidence to take on Goliath, the nine-foot-tall Philistine soldier who had been tormenting the king’s troops for weeks. *David answered Saul, “Your servant has been tending his father’s sheep. Whenever a lion or a bear came and carried off a lamb from the flock, I went after it, struck it down, and rescued the lamb from its mouth. If it*



reared up against me, I would grab it by its fur, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed lions and bears; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.” Then David said, “The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine” (1 Samuel 17:34-37). Being a good (or noble) shepherd meant assuming risk to protect the flock.

It is no surprise that David viewed the Lord as his shepherd. In the most well-known psalm, David wrote, *“The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need”* (Psalm 23:1). Being a good shepherd was not passive; but active. David described the Lord’s shepherding as leading, renewing, comforting, preparing, anointing and pursuing (Psalm 23).

The Good Shepherd is invested in the welfare of His sheep. They belong to him, and he wants to protect and nurture them. By contrast, the hired hand is not motivated by the same things. Jesus described them saying, *“The hired hand, since he is not the shepherd and doesn’t own the sheep, leaves them, and runs away when he sees a wolf coming. The wolf then snatches and scatters them. This happens because he is a hired hand and doesn’t care about the sheep”* (vv. 12-13). Who are these hired hands? Context tells us that Jesus was referring to the Pharisees who were “hired” to care for God’s flock. However, as Jesus said many times, they were more interested in the law and in their own power than the care of God’s people. As Ezekiel prophesied, God would remove the flock from the uncaring shepherds and instead would care for His flock personally. *“You are My flock, the flock of My pasture; you are men, and I am your God,” says the Lord GOD*” (Ezekiel 34:31).

The Good Shepherd stands in stark contrast to the hired hand who runs away from the sheep. In Luke 15:1-7, Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees and used this parable to explain His care for His sheep:

“All the tax collectors and sinners were approaching to listen to him. And the Pharisees and scribes were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

So he told them this parable: “What man among you, who has a hundred sheep and loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open field and go after the lost one until he finds it? When he has found it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders, and coming home, he calls his friends and neighbors together, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!’ I tell you, in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who don’t need repentance.”

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who not only cares for His flock, refusing to run away from danger, but He actively searches for lost sheep to bring them back into the flock.

The Good Shepherd cares for the sheep, sacrifices for the sheep, and searches for the sheep. He also knows His sheep individually. In verse 14 Jesus said, “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. I lay down my life for the sheep” (vv. 14-15). Like the shepherd inspecting each individual sheep as it



returns to the pen at night, Jesus knows us individually, and cares for us specifically. As God, Jesus knew us before we were born (Jeremiah 1:5), He knows our whereabouts at all times (Psalm 139:1-2), He knows every word we are going to speak before we open our mouths (Psalm 139:4), He knows every hair on our heads (Matthew 10:30), He knows our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7), and He even knows our sin (Psalm 69:5). Yet He loves us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3), demonstrating that love for us even before we loved Him (Romans 5:8). Jesus compares His intimate knowledge of us to His intimate knowledge of the Father. He knows us fully and intimately, loves us despite our flaws and failures, and = sacrificed Himself for us. He is a Good Shepherd, indeed!

DISCUSS

- *How did Jesus distinguish Himself from the hired hands?*
- *Timothy Keller, in his book “The Meaning of Marriage, wrote, “To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is...what it means to be loved by God.” How might understanding that God knows everything about us make us feel shame or vulnerability? How can today’s passage encourage us?*
- *Where might God be calling you to reflect shepherd-like love and acceptance toward someone else? How could that kind of love positively impact families, churches, schools, or even a workplace?*

3. One Flock and One Shepherd—Jesus Gathers His People

John 10:16-21: *But I have other sheep that are not from this sheep pen; I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock, one shepherd. This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”*

Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, “He has a demon and he’s crazy. Why do you listen to him?” Others were saying, “These aren’t the words of someone who is demon-possessed. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

Unpacking John 10:16-21

Throughout the Bible, we see times when expansion meant scarcity and fear. In Genesis 13, Abram and Lot’s herders quarreled over resources for their increasingly large flocks. The result is that the men separated—Lot moving toward Sodom, and Abram staying in the Negev. God expanded their territory to meet the need. In Acts 6, we see fighting between the Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews over distribution of food to their widows. God provided deacons, and a system was put in place to make sure that all vulnerable people in the church received care. We might recall in John 6, when the resources available—two fish and five loaves—were grossly inadequate to feed a crowd of more than 5,000 men. Jesus blessed and multiplied the meal to feed a multitude. While the world might succumb to a scarcity mindset—seeing “not enough”



everywhere they look— God’s kingdom is an expanding one. The kingdom of God doesn’t shrink to match our resources; it expands to meet the mission. Jesus’s kingdom is a growing one.

In John 10:16 Jesus said, *“But I have other sheep that are not from this sheep pen; I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock, one shepherd.”* Jesus expanded the vision of God’s kingdom to include the Gentiles, and His statement pointed toward His coming unifying work on the cross. A careful reading of the Old Testament shows God always planned to include the Gentiles in His kingdom. In Isaiah 49:6 the prophet foretold of Jesus, *“. . . It is not enough for you to be my servant raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the protected ones of Israel. I will also make you a light for the nations, to be my salvation to the ends of the earth.”* In Isaiah 42:6, the prophet said the Messiah would be called *“a covenant for the people and a light to the nations.”* Even David, in Psalm 22:27 said, *“All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before you.”* The idea that the Messiah would unite both Jews and Gentiles in God’s kingdom was not new. Jesus set Himself apart from the *“hired hands”* of the Pharisees and declared that He would fulfill the messianic promises of the Old Testament.

“This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father” (John 10:17-18).

Obedience and love point toward the perfect relationship between the Father and Son. The Father loved the Son, so the Son loved us unto death. Because of the love between the Father and Son, the Son has authority both to lay His life down, but also to pick it back up (the resurrection). Christ’s death and resurrection are evidence of His relationship with the Father, and the authority Christ was given to atone for the sins of the world. Love and obedience intertwine.

From that same love and obedience, Jesus had the authority to unite sinful mankind with God. This loving gesture would extend beyond Israel to the Gentiles. God’s Kingdom is expanding even today, until the time when it will include a *“vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”* (Revelation 7:9) Jesus, the Good Shepherd, declared in John 10 that He had the authority, given by God, to unite all people in God’s kingdom.

From the earliest days of the Church, Jesus’s mission to reach the ends of the earth were made clear. On the day of Pentecost, God sent the Holy Spirit to the apostles, enabling them to speak in different tongues and proclaim the gospel to Jews from every nation (Acts 2:1-13). In Acts 10, Peter received a vision to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, and proclaimed, *“Now I truly understand that God doesn’t show favoritism, but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him”* (Acts 10:34-35). Finally, in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Council, Peter approached the council and declared, *“Brothers, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the*



Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:7-9). God’s kingdom is expanding by the sacrifice and authority of the Good Shepherd.

John 10:19-21 says, *“Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, “He has a demon and he’s crazy. Why do you listen to him?” Others were saying, “These aren’t the words of someone who is demon-possessed. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”* Jesus’s claims were provocative, and He left little room for confusion. He boldly declared He is the Messiah, and He came to unite Jews and Gentiles in God’s kingdom. Some assumed that the difficulty of His words indicated demon-possession, and He should be disregarded. Others, however, were compelled by the power of His miracles, pointing out that a demon-possessed person couldn’t do the things He had.

These two powerful *“I Am”* statements of Jesus—*“I am the gate”* and *“I am the good shepherd”*—speak to Christ’s identity, authority, and love. He protects His people from thieves and robbers, He secures their safety and salvation, He cares for them as a loving Shepherd, and He has authority to unite people from the whole world in God’s kingdom. Our destiny is safe with the Good Shepherd as we find both our salvation and rest in Him.

DISCUSS

- *Who are the “other sheep” Jesus referred to in verse 16? What implications does this have for today?*
- *How does knowing you belong to one united flock shape your view of other believers?*
- *If Jesus came to unite all nations in God’s Kingdom, what is our role in missions? How might God be stretching your view of what it means to participate in Christ’s mission?*

DEEPER FOCUS

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

- *What worldly “gates” offer protection but ultimately bring harm?*
- *How have you experienced the Shepherd’s voice guiding you?*
- *How can you discern Jesus’s voice amid the competing cultural voices?*
- *What would “abundant life” look like in your season of life?*



RESPOND TO THE TEXT

- *Think about the promises Jesus made to His sheep in verses 7-10. What do you find humbling and what do you find comforting?*

APPLY

Where might God be calling you to reflect shepherd-like care toward someone vulnerable?

How might our small group reflect the unity of “one flock”?

REFERENCES

John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986).

Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011).