

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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True and False Shepherds

by Dan Trygg

The context carries over from chapter 9. **Jesus is with the man whom He had healed of his blindness, and who had been unjustly excommunicated by the Pharisees. He is addressing His remarks to *them*.**

“Truly, truly, I say to you...” Once again we see Jesus introduce an important statement by this phrase. The word “you” is plural, so *He is definitely addressing the Pharisees*, not just the man who had been blind. **“...the one who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep is a thief and a robber.”** (10:1). In order to understand this parable that Jesus employs, we must have a little background information. **Sheepfolds in Israel were not just corrals or pens**, which would allow too much vulnerability to predators or thieves. **They were enclosures walled in with rock**, Palestine's most abundant and cheapest building material, **often to a height of *more than six feet***. **The door also was not a flimsy gate, but usually a heavy, solid wooden door** that was capable of withstanding an attack by robbers. It was heavily barred, and access was permitted only to those known to the doorkeeper. Obviously, anyone who would try to gain entrance by coming over the wall would have had an illegitimate purpose for being there. **A thief is one who comes with trickery or deception**, who attempts to sneak in and out undetected, **while a robber is one who employs force and violence to get what he wants**. In the case of these religious leaders, *both* images were applicable. They put on the *appearance* of being God-ordained shepherds, or leaders, of the people, but they really were not what they claimed to be, ...and *they were not above using violence* to get or keep what they wanted.

“...the one who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens” (vss. 2,3). **The one who has legitimate authority for the sheep will not need to employ deception or force.** **“...the sheep hear his voice...”** The sheep recognize the voice of the one who regularly cares for them. **The responsiveness of the sheep themselves reveals their relationship to their shepherd.** **“...he calls his own sheep by name...”** **He knows each one personally and intimately.** The flock is not a nameless multitude to him. He recognizes the differences of each sheep, not only their physical characteristics, but also their personalities and individual quirks. His knowledge of the flock is also a sign of the legitimate shepherd. **How different this description of a shepherd's relationship to his flock is to the attitude of the Pharisees toward the people they “oversaw”.** They referred to them as **“accursed”** (cf. 7:49).

“When he puts forth all his own...” (vs. 4). **The sheepfold would have contained the flocks of several shepherds.** **This shepherd would have taken *only his own sheep***, ...not any that belonged to someone else. **He would also have made certain that *all* of his sheep had come out, that *none were left behind*.** For them to be healthy, they needed time grazing on the hillsides. **Only by knowing them *well*, and by having a number *small enough* that he could keep track of each individual sheep, could a shepherd effectively do this.** **“...he goes *before* them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice”.** This is a very different phenomenon than herding cattle or goats. **A shepherd in Israel did not *drive* his sheep, or even “herd” his sheep. He *led* them. They followed him *because he was familiar to them and because they trusted him*.**

“A stranger they simply will *not* follow, but will flee from him, because they do not *know* the voice of strangers” (vs. 5). **The key mark of the legitimate shepherd is *the response of the sheep themselves*.** No matter if someone might *pretend to be* the shepherd, or *act like* the shepherd, or even *dress in the shepherd's clothes*, the sheep will not be fooled. **They will not follow the voice of *anyone* but their true shepherd.**

“This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them...” (vs. 6). **Another stylistic peculiarity of John is that *he never uses the word “parable”, as the other three Gospel writers did. He prefers another word, paroimia***, which was never employed in the Synoptic Gospels, either. **This word refers to a saying that is a proverb, byword, puzzle, or “dark saying”.** **It was an utterance whose real meaning was *not on the surface*, but had a *deeper message*.** Cf. Jn. 16:25 (twice) and 29. The use of this word here by John indicates that **Jesus was attempting to teach a lesson to the Pharisees here. He was using this description of sheep and shepherd to *make a specific, deeper point*.** That is why this seems like such a strange thing to comment on in this context, and why some have even thought that this is an entirely new context. **It is supposed to sound peculiar. It is supposed to sound kind of “off the wall”, ...so that it will grab your attention and have a greater impact when you finally “get it”.** **“...but *they did not understand* what... He had been saying to them.”** If this had been an entirely new context, it would not make any sense to put this comment here. The surface meaning of vss. 1-5 is straightforward enough. What is to be confused about? **Set into the context of chapter 9, however, you can see what they were confused about. It seemed to be a totally irrelevant commentary. What was He getting at?**

“Jesus therefore said to them *again...*” (vs. 7). **Since they were not understanding, Jesus expanded on the illustration, to make it more plain.** “Truly, truly...” *Another* solemn statement coming up! **“I am the door of the sheep.” The only legitimate access into the sheepfold is by means of Him.** He is there to protect the sheep from thieves and robbers who would prey upon them, and to allow admittance to those who are legitimate shepherds. **They had been examining Him to see if He was a legitimate teacher of God. Jesus is turning the tables to say that they are the ones on trial here. He is the judge of their authenticity.** Note, this is the third “I am” saying of this type (6:35; 8:12).

“All who came before Me are thieves and robbers” (vs. 8). **Those who try to lead without proper authority, are thieves and robbers.** There had been plenty of examples of false and abusive shepherds in Israel’s history (Jer. 23:1-5; Ezk. 34:1-31). In addition, there had arisen false messiahs and pretenders-at-position, people who had usurped authority by self-promotion. **If God did not send them to lead, what are they doing there?** The present false shepherds had “*seated themselves* upon the seat of Moses” (Matt. 23:2). They *claimed* a right to the sheep, but lacked the real authority from God. “...the sheep did not hear them...” **The genuine children of God could easily discern that these shepherds did not really care for them, and therefore did not trust them, or give heed to them.**

Passing through the “Door” meant legitimacy and safety in leadership, but it also meant safety, provision and health for the sheep. In the natural, the sheep would follow the shepherd out of the doorway of the fold. The shepherd would lead the sheep to safe and beneficial places to graze, all the while watching over and caring for their needs. In the evening, the sheep would follow the shepherd back to the fold, where they were protected from thieves, robbers or predators. If there was no sheepfold, the flock would be in the open field, exposed to danger. A sheep that was able to come in to the safety of a sheep fold was much more secure. In the word picture application, Jesus says that any sheep that comes through Him into the fold will “be saved”. He or she will go in and go out and find “pasture” (Lit., a ‘spreading-out’, because that is what the flock did, it ‘spread out’ to graze in whatever feeding area it was led to.)

“The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy...” (vs. 10). **Thieves come with stealth, secrecy, and imposture. Their purpose is to take what does not belong to them.** The Greek actually says, “The thief does not come *except...*” **If they saw no possibility of self-gain, they would not bother to get involved with the sheep at all. It is all about self-interest for them.** Unfortunately, *their gain* comes *at the expense of the sheep.* “I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly.” **The purpose of Jesus’ coming was to give benefit to the sheep, His people.** There is no “it” in this latter phrase. Literally, “in order that they might have (and be having) *life* and they might have (and be having) *overflowing/abundance*”. **The health and fulfillment of the sheep is the concern of Jesus.** Think of Psalm 23, the “Shepherd’s Psalm”. “Yahweh is my Shepherd, there is nothing that I lack.” The apostle Paul wrote, “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed” (II Cor. 9:8). He wants us to have what we need, and extra to help others (Eph. 4:28).

“I am the Good Shepherd...” (vss. 11-15). A fourth “I am” saying. The word for “good” refers not so much to moral uprightness as to “skillful, sound, beneficial”. **The effective shepherd cares for the sheep before his own comfort or safety. A good and healthy shepherd is willing to sacrifice, be uncomfortable, experience hardship, and even risk his or her own life on behalf of the sheep.** By contrast, a hireling will carry out *some of the tasks of shepherding for the sake of his pay; but he will abandon the sheep in the face of danger!* His *real* interest is the *money*, ...not the sheep. As a result, the sheep are easy prey. Like other good shepherds, Jesus was willing to lay down His life (His natural life, self or soul - Gk., *psuchē*) on behalf of His people.

“I have other sheep which are not of this fold...” (vs. 16). **This is probably an allusion to the Gentiles.** “...and I must bring them also”. The word order in the Greek gives a little different emphasis: “...also *these* it is necessary for Me to lead”. It would seem that **the Father has appointed Jesus to be their Shepherd, too.** “...and *they* shall hear My voice.” The sign of an intimate, familiar shepherd relationship. The implication might also be that they do *not* have this relationship with Him *now*, ...but that they *will*. This is one of several places in the gospel of John where **Jesus teaches that a relationship with God should involve real authentic communication from Him.** (Cf. 5:19,30; 6:44,45; 14:16-26; 15:26,27; 16:13-15.) “...and they shall become one flock with one shepherd.” **Jesus was going to make the two groups (Jew and Gentile) into one new people under His leadership** (Cf. Eph. 2:11-22; Rom. 11:17-24).

“For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life...” (vss. 17,18) *The Father delights in such dedicated caring for others that is willing to disregard comfort, convenience, and even safety on behalf of another’s well-being.* “...that *I* may take it again...” A clear reference to the resurrection. *The Scriptures depict all three persons of the triune Godhead as being involved in the raising of Jesus from the dead* (cf. Acts 2:32; Rom. 1:4). **Here the emphasis is upon Jesus’ own role, both in voluntarily laying down His life (no one has taken it from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative) and in voluntarily raising Himself.** Once again, however, *He ascribes to the Father the source of this ability.*

“There arose a division again among the Jews because of His words” (vss. 19-21). As in 9:16, some readily dismissed Him as demonized or crazy, while others could not ignore the powerful sign He had just performed.