

Title: “The Good Shepherd”

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Acts 4:1-12, John 10:11-18

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Service Readings: Acts 4:1-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

We explore what Jesus meant when He taught that He was the Good Shepherd.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, -

Let us pause at this verse for just a moment. If I were a sheep, I would feel a sense of comfort and security. I would feel safe being laid down in green pastures for I would know that my shepherd would be there to watch over and protect me. However, this is not where the sentence ends; it continues. Let me read that entire sentence for you:

¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

You see? If I were a sheep, I'd be quite nervous right about now. What does he mean “he will lay down his life” for me, the sheep? These words would hit my ears and cause me to raise my head. I would be concerned that there might come a time when I would be left alone with a dead shepherd and a very live wolf! You see, as a sheep, I really don't find much comfort in thinking that my shepherd will fight to his death, unless... unless he can also guarantee me that he'll take the enemy with him in the process. Otherwise, I'm not quite sure how his dying is going to be beneficial to me.

Thank you, Lord that I am not a sheep... but I am! At least in this passage. Jesus makes it clear that he is not talking about *actual* sheep but about me, and you! And so I'm back to being worried because the stakes are much higher, now. Our pasture is much larger than a few acres of land, and our enemies are far more ferocious and cunning than simple wolves. Our world is large and it is filled with all sorts of evils – physical and spiritual. Our attackers include wolves dressed in sheep's clothing. Even more, our attackers include sheep who have made alliances with the wolves and now do their bidding! It is a dangerous time, indeed to be a sheep in this world. And the last thing I want to consider is that the only protection I have could be killed in any attack. That doesn't sit very well with me. Quite frankly, I don't think I want a shepherd that is just *willing* to lay down his life for me. I think I want a shepherd that is able to *conquer* the enemy and stay alive!

When Jesus spoke these words, I wonder what might have been in the minds of the Jewish community. I wonder if they would have understood him to mean that he was willing to fight to the death for them. It was this kind of thinking that permeated throughout that community during the time of Jesus. The Sadducees, the rulers, the elders, and the scribes that you heard about in Acts would have all probably thought this same thing: they needed a royal shepherd like David who could stand against the evil of that time and conquer it. They were waiting for someone like him who *would be* willing to fight to the death. Of course, because he would be sent by God, death would not have been a possible outcome. Instead, this promised shepherd would come and conquer, *and stay alive in the process*. Any other option, especially one that ended in the

shepherd's death would not have made any sense. In other words, they too probably found no use in a shepherd that was willing to die, they needed one who was able to stay alive.

And to them, Jesus wasn't that promised shepherd. Why? Because, regardless of what Peter and John proclaimed, Jesus had died. Shepherds who overthrow Rome, shepherds who are promised by God, simply don't die. But Jesus died. They all witnessed it. So Jesus could not be their shepherd.

And so in Acts, when Peter spoke to these elders, when he corrected their faulty way of thinking, they were confused and even angry. For Peter was challenging the very foundation of their beliefs. He was claiming that death was not defeat, it was victory! Jesus had become their savior, their salvation.. through death! How is that even possible? And what kind of salvation is he even speaking about? Rome was still in power and Israel still didn't control the land God had given them. You see, to these first hearers, none of this made sense. And so they were confused. They were frustrated. They were angry. And they were still waiting for their royal shepherd.

What they didn't understand was that the war plan of Jesus was different than the war plan of men. What they didn't understand was that Rome wasn't the greatest problem they had – it was sin! What they didn't understand was that the only way to conquer this enemy would be to use its most powerful weapon against itself – death. Jesus *had* to die. He *had* to experience the punishment for our sins. This physical and spiritual death *was the only way* that victory could be accomplished and sin defeated. *Jesus came to die*. But Jesus didn't *just* come to die, he also came to defeat sin *through his death*. He came to proclaim victory over it by taking his life back up again.

The whole battle plan is exactly this: Jesus laying down his life so that his sheep don't have to. And then taking it back up again as proof that he has accomplished what he promised he would do. He says:

¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

Is it no wonder that the Father loves him? In complete obedience to the Father, he has come, not in the clothing of a royal shepherd, not in the clothing of a warrior, but in the clothing of one sentenced to death. He has come hidden in the form of man, not to fight but to die. He has come to lay down his life. And in doing so he will have conquered the enemy.

If I were a sheep, I'd no longer be nervous. If I were a sheep, I would feel a sense of comfort and security. I would feel safe being laid down in green pastures for I would know that my shepherd would be there to watch over and protect me. I would know this because he laid down his life for me and in doing so won the war over sin and death. And I would feel loved because I know that he did it willingly. And I would feel drawn ever closer to him because I know that my Good Shepherd died for my sins.

And I am a sheep. I am Jesus' sheep and he is my shepherd. And I do feel safe with him; and I do feel secure with him. And I do feel loved by him. And I am drawn ever closer to him. And I know that I can confess to him all that I have done. I can look upon him and know that even though I am a poor, miserable sinner, I can confess to God all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended him and justly deserved his temporal and eternal punishment. And I can confess that I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them. And I can pray for forgiveness. And I can know that in his boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter, sufferings and death of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who willingly laid

down his life for me, his sheep, that he will be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being. And I know that Jesus will turn to me and announce this grace of God unto me, and that because of his death, that my sins are indeed forgiven. And this is true for you.

Jesus has given us eternal life and we will never perish, and no one will snatch us out of his hand. It is so good to be his sheep.

Please pray with me.

Lord, you are the Good Shepherd who came to lay down your life for your sheep. Grant us faith in your enduring love and strength – knowing that you have not just laid your life down but have raised it up again and that you are with us, guiding and protecting us as we wait in joyful hope for your return.

Amen.