

Jesus the Good Shepherd who gives Abundant Life. John 10:1-11

Have you ever read a piece of scripture and wondered, “What does this mean? And how does it apply to my life? This week is no different. Sheep and shepherd, gate and gatekeeper, thief and bandit, voices, abundant life. What’s all that mean? How does it apply to our lives?

John is describing the final address of Jesus, using the I AM to explain His identity as Messiah. If you have been doing the On Line Bible study you may have already explored Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Jesus uses the imagery of the Good Shepherd which was well understood by the listeners at that time. So Jesus uses a metaphor or figure of speech in this passage. That’s why this text, like so many of Jesus’ sayings and teachings, is difficult to understand, and that’s also the key to dealing with this text. This text cannot be taken literally as if we use our rational and logical mind we will struggle to understand it fully. The figure of speech points beyond itself, in this case to abundant life. A figure of speech asks us to think, see, and listen differently.

Now today we may not fully understand the role in 1st Century Palestine of the shepherd and his responsibility to care for his sheep. A shepherd was a familiar figure in Palestine and he spent most of his time with his flock. He led, not drove, his sheep to fresh grazing pastures so the sheep never ran loose. At night he guarded them from wild animals and thieves who wanted to steal the sheep for their own gain. Some pens had high fences and a strong gate and even a night watchman. Others, had a surrounding low wall and no gate. In these circumstances, the shepherd would lie across the entrance to protect his sheep. Basically he became the gate.

In some circumstances more than one flock of sheep were inside the pen, all intermingled. But in the morning all the shepherd had to do was call to his sheep, they recognised his voice and would follow him. The rest of the sheep would wait till they heard their shepherd's voice.

Jesus says He came so that we might have life and have it abundantly. What does that mean for you? Where is your life abundant? And in what ways is it less than abundant? Keep in mind, however, that abundance is not something we get. It's a way of living and being.

Point 1: Jesus has chosen us.

In verse 3 Jesus says that the gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Out of the many sheep in the pen He selects His own. What a wonder! What a mystery! What a joy! God chose us. God picked us. Before the worlds were born He chose us, He picked us to be His sheep.

Jesus is saying we have not chosen Him but He has chosen us. Think about the sheep, they don't line up together to pick out which Shepherd they want. It is the other way round. We are not here by luck or fate or chance. We are here according to the good pleasure of His will.

In Verse 14 Jesus states that He knows His sheep and we, as sheep know Him. That means Jesus knows our name. It's never 'hey you'. He knows all about us. When we sit and when we rise. He knows all our thoughts, our strengths, weaknesses and sins. And He still calls us.

And the sheep, His sheep, us, listen to His voice. Out of a thousand beckoning voices in our world, the sheep know their Master's voice. The

Good Shepherd calls us by our name and when we listen, respond and follow Him – we have been chosen.

Point 2: Jesus cares for us.

In verse 3 we are told that the Shepherd leads his sheep out. Judean sheep were never left on their own. They were supervised, guided and guarded.

Jesus never sleeps, He is always watching over us, leading and guiding. Not all of His ways of protecting us are pleasant, of course.

One tool every shepherd in Palestine had was a sling. They had slings as weapons of defence as well as a means to keep the sheep in line. If one of the sheep started to wander off out would come the sling. It wasn't long until a rock was zinging over the wandering sheep's head. It probably nearly scared the life out of the sheep but it soon learned not to wander away from the flock.

And sometimes we are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love. But God loves us too much to let us go too far. God's discipline is never meant to hurt us. It is meant to restore us. When God aims His sling at us it is used to heal not kill.

Point 3: Jesus gave Himself for us

Verses 11-15 states that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. Everything Jesus endured, He endured for us. He gave Himself into the hands of the arresting party in the Garden of Gethsemane – for us.

When He was beaten it was for us.

When He was condemned to death it was for us.

When He hung on the cross in agony it was for us.

Point 4: Jesus protects us.

Jesus warns us about the thieves and bandits but this is not about having our things stolen but about having our life stolen and our abundance depleted.

Thieves are stealthy. They often come in the night when we are asleep and unaware. Bandits come in daylight and we know when they are here and when we are being robbed.

One day we wake up and wonder what happened to our life. How did we get to this point? Our life is a mess and we don't know when or how it happened. Where did our life go? Maybe time caught up with us, maybe we took a relationship for granted, maybe we procrastinated, maybe we were too comfortable, maybe we became complacent, maybe we were too busy or preoccupied, maybe we weren't paying attention, maybe we just gave up, maybe we opened our heart to the wrong person or thing.

And we recognize the patterns and behaviours that are destructive, but we seem to continue down the same path. It's knowing what will give life but giving in to fear.

We are the gatekeepers of our lives. We are the keeper and guardian of our heart. Guarding our heart means staying awake, being watchful, and remaining diligent. Awareness of and reflection on what is happening within and outside us are the gatekeeper's key. Depending on who or what it is we either open our heart or keep it closed.

Sometimes we need to open the gate and sometimes we need to keep the gate of our life closed.

To whom or what have you opened your heart in the past? Where did it take you – to pastures of abundance, a dead end, or maybe a detour? When have you opened your heart and been surprised by possibilities and a fullness of life you could never have imagined?

Point 5: Jesus keeps us satisfied?

We do not have to make our decisions alone or in isolation. Jesus said, “I am the gate.” He is the gate that opens and leads to the pastures of abundant life and He is the gate that stands against death. We open or close in collaboration with Jesus. “The sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice. The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy, I have come that they may have life and have it to the full or abundantly”.

The abundant life is not about quantity, wealth, success, approval, popularity, security, being number one, or any of the other things we often think it is. How many times have you gotten what you wanted, been what others said you should be, or done what was encouraged and rewarded by society only to discover your own emptiness and poverty? You had it all but you were not abundant.

An abundant life is about meaning, it adds and enhances our own life as well as the lives of others.

So let me ask you - what voices are you listening to today?

The voices we listen to form and shape our lives and there are a myriad of voices in our world. What voices are rattling around in you? Vying for your attention? Who do you sound like when you speak?

It could be your mom or dad, your spouse, your boss, your fear or anger, your wounds, the church, politicians, television, the internet, friends, money, success, popularity, expectations, failures, self-criticism or self-hatred. Is it the voice of thieves and bandits?

Or is it the voice of wisdom, life, love, compassion, beauty, generosity, hope, joy? The voice of Jesus? The voice of a shepherd? Which voices are loudest in your life today? What voices have you invested in? Are they worthy of your trust and your life or are they bankrupt? Are they bankrupting you? To which voices do you need to close the gate of your heart and to which ones do you need to open?