

THE GOOD SHEPHERD IN ACTION

The central chapters of John's Gospel are interconnected and developed in a very interesting way. The central theme is the activity of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd. This study follows His involvement in word and action as He establishes His credentials as the One sent to accomplish the Father's will by 'laying down His life and taking it up again'. We commence with the failure of the shepherd's of Israel in chapter nine and conclude with the astonishing episode of washing His disciple's feet in chapter thirteen.

"The blind man answered and said, a man that is called Jesus made clay and anointed mine eyes, and said unto me, Go to the pool of Siloam and wash, and I went and washed and received sight...Jesus heard that they had cast him out (of the synagogue); and when he found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God...and he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him." - John 9:11, 36-38.

Here we have the story of a blind man who finds the Saviour and has his sight restored. Or we could say that he was a lost sheep in the fold of Israel, who is found by the TRUE shepherd - John 10:1. The religious leaders of Israel did not recognise the voice of the True Shepherd. In fact, they accused Him of being false (v.22) - "*they had agreed, already, that if any man would confess him to be the Christ/Messiah, he should be put out of (excommunicated) the synagogue.*"

Instead of these shepherds of the nation recognising and rejoicing in the restoration of one of their 'sheep's' eyesight, they put him out of the synagogue, disgraced and disowned. These religious leaders were more concerned with their traditions and status than the Word of God. They assumed that they were pleasing God, while all the time their minds were closed as to who Jesus really was. They saw their position as leaders of the Jewish flock threatened by the actions and teachings of the young rabbi from Nazareth.

But the excommunication of the newly seeing man from the synagogue led to him being found by the Good Shepherd who had just given to him not only physical sight but would give an even greater blessing, SPIRITUAL SIGHT!

When he met his benefactor face to face, he obviously did not recognize Him. He had met Him, heard His command "Go wash", but couldn't see Him. And so he has to ask "Who is he that I might believe?" What an unforgettable experience to hear the words "Thou has both seen him and it is he that talketh with thee". He was seeing for the first time, face to face, the Son of God, Messiah of Israel, and Saviour of the world!

The prophecy against the shepherds of Israel detailed in Ezekiel 34 is summarised in verse 4. *"The diseased have you not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost, but with force and with rigour have ye ruled over them. And they were scattered because there was no shepherd."*

This story is a living parable. The thieves and robbers are direct references to the false shepherds who treated this man so disgracefully. In contrast, the heart of the Good Shepherd went out after this disfigured and sick sheep, giving him not only his sight but also Life in abundance.

As we enter chapter 10 and listen to the familiar words; *"Verily, verily, I say unto you"* our first question is; whom is the Lord speaking to? The final words of chapter 9 give us the answer; *"YOUR sin remains"*. So He is continuing to address the same people, the religious hierarchy of Israel referred to above. He accuses them of an improper entry into the fold in contrast to His own entry by the door.

This is therefore a pivotal chapter in that it introduces a dispensational change, summarised in chapter 1:17. *"The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ"*.

The "the door into the sheepfold" (v1) is referring to the gate of a winter sheepfold. This was a communal enclosure in which a number of flocks were kept in safety during the long winter nights and was guarded by a gatekeeper. The "porter" also referred to as a "hireling" (v12). The shepherds would come for their flocks and be admitted by him, he obviously would open to the bona fide shepherds. The Lord was clearly signalling that He had the proper credentials to be admitted as the true Shepherd into the fold, which was Israel.

The Old Testament Scriptures right from Genesis to Malachi abound in prophetic references to the coming of such a One. Details of His proper ancestry through the patriarchs, kings and prophets, the place and nature of His birth are all well recorded.

We might ask, in this context, Who is the porter? It seems He is referring to John the Baptist, the introducer of the Shepherd to the nation as "the Lamb of God". And as He emerges from the Jordan waters at His baptism the heavens are opened, the Spirit of God descends and authenticates His divine credentials - *"This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased"*.

As we move to verse 7, the Shepherd refers to another sheepfold door, not guarded by a porter but by Himself. It is a reference to the summer sheepfold. A stone built pen the entrance to which is an opening without a door. When night comes, the shepherd counts and inspects his sheep as they pass under the rod (Ezekiel 20:37). He lights a fire and then positions himself across the opening and becomes the door of the sheep. This Shepherd, however, lifts the natural to the supernatural and continues *"by me if any man enter in he shall be saved and shall go in and out and find pasture"*. He has come not only to bring security to the flock, but liberty. He will do it by *"laying down his life for the sheep"*. We grasp the pathos of this as He continues *"therefore doth my Father love me because I lay down my life that I might take it again"*! This is a preordained agreement within the Godhead, planned from eternity. But not just for the salvation of Jewish sheep! True, it was among them that the good news of eternal life would be preached first as referred to in Matthew 10:5-6, when commissioning His disciples *"go not into any way of the Gentiles... but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"*. However, He makes clear in this discourse (v16) *"other sheep I have which are not of this (Jewish) fold, them (Gentiles) also I must bring and there shall be one flock and one shepherd"*. Note: "flock" as opposed to "fold".

We need to pause here and contemplate the verb "have" that He uses for both sets of sheep. Twice over in verses three and four He calls His Jewish sheep *"his own"* saying that He knows their names, that they will hear His voice and follow Him. The verb "have" indicates prior ownership, the divine plan of

election. Four times over in the following Olivet discourse in chapter 17, verses 6, 9, 11 and 24, He refers *"to those whom thou hast given me"*. It is well for us to remember that God is the first cause of our salvation and in chapter 6:44 we have this truth reinforced *"...no man cometh to me except the Father which sent me draw him"*.

Verse 18 is the high water mark of this discourse. *"No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of myself, I have power (right/authority) to lay it down, and I have power (right/authority) to take it again, this commandment have I received from my Father"*.

What a statement! Unparalleled in all time and beyond human comprehension. In speaking out these words with all that they implied the Good Shepherd signalled the way by which He would fulfil His Father's will, expressed in the best known verse of Scripture. Let us marvel again at what it says, *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son. That whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life"* - John 3:16.

The title of this study is 'The Good Shepherd in Action', so it is therefore not surprising that He now illustrates that He means what He says. How best can He demonstrate it? He allows the deepest sorrow and heartbreak to enter the little home in Bethany with an illness that led to the death of his close friend Lazarus. His sisters Mary and Martha were beside themselves with grief. *"Lord"*, they chided in succession, *"if thou hadst been here my brother had not died"* - John 11:21-32. The Good Shepherd's reaction is vividly described for us in verses 33-35 in three terse statements; *"he groaned in the spirit"*; *"and was troubled"*; *"Jesus wept"*. To 'groan' has the meaning of righteous anger even to the point of rage. Why so? What filled the Shepherd's gentle soul with indignation? As He stood outside that tomb, its mouth closed with a stone, He saw that the man created by God, His Father, in His image was now a rotting corpse, as the results of sin and because of it death reigned. The man He lost in Eden now seemed to be more lost than ever and not this man only but all before him and the generations to follow, *"born in sin and shapen in iniquity"* - Psalm 51:5. The archenemy, the deceiver Himself was responsible and that made the Good Shepherd exceedingly angry. This resulted in His "being

troubled". This is the same expression used in John 5:4-7 regarding the 'troubling' of the waters. When a calm pool is troubled it ripples, we might say it trembles. I have a firm conviction that as the Lord stood there He literally trembled. Was it because that knowing all that was to befall Him, the horror of Gethsemane, the cruelty of Pilate's judgement hall, and above it all the purpose for which He came to defeat him who had the power of death, pay the ransom price for man's redemption and meet the requirement of His Holy Father, that he trembled? Then the climax; Divine eyes shed human tears! It was but a foretaste of the "*strong crying and tears*" - *Hebrews 5:7*, that were to be His lot. Amazingly He then cries with a loud voice after prayer to His Father; "*Lazarus come forth!*" - *11:43*. We might join in our worship now with the hymn writer

*Death could not keep its prey,
Jesus my Saviour.
He tore the bars away,
Jesus my Lord.'*

This episode was a precious foretaste of the certainty of His own resurrection when He would become the first fruits of a mighty harvest.

It is not surprising therefore that we find the Good Shepherd as guest at the table of the united family in Bethany in chapter 12. What a reunion that must have been! For a visitor to that supper, who was not familiar with the previous events, to be told that the man Lazarus sitting there in perfect health and looking as he always had been was in recent times dead and decaying for four days in a tomb would have been extremely difficult to believe. But this is a demonstration, however limited, of what abundant life in Christ brings. Not only satisfying in the present but assurance of being like Him and seeing Him as He is for all eternity; sinless and deathless. We listen to His own assurance "*because I live you shall live also*".

As we join in spirit in the celebrations in Bethany we could say that it is not only a house of Feasting, but also a house of Favour, their Lord was present: this makes it too a house of Fellowship, full family relationships have been restored; but soon it would be a house of Fragrance! Let us observe it again as though we had been there; "*Mary therefore took a pound of ointment of*

spikenard, very precious. And anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment” - v3.

There is every possibility that John, the recorder of the incident and the other disciples were present. We should note verse 2 “...Lazarus was *ONE* of them that sat at meat with him”. A clear indication that others, unnamed were present. As they all eventually left the home that day, the fragrance that permeated their clothes would travel with them. This begs the question; How is it with us? Indwelt by the Holy Spirit, assured of the Lord’s continual presence, are we spreading abroad the fragrances of love, gentleness and goodness, to mention but a few of the graces available to us as we walk and work in a polluted world.

We conclude this study with a brief reference to the following chapter 13. In one sense we move from a consideration of the actions of the Good Shepherd to that of the Great Shepherd (Hebrews 13), demonstrating a foretaste of His present ministry; washing the feet of His disciples. Recently I have pondered the implication of verse 12 “*So when he had washed their feet ...*” twelve pairs of feet! How long it would take their Master to do this is uncertain, but possibly at least one hour and on His knees! What devotion. I wonder, too, what the inner thoughts of the disciples were as they waited their turn? We certainly know Simon Peter’s reaction and the profound lessons we learn from it. But what of Judas? It seems clear from the context that he had his feet washed. Perhaps as it took place he did not fully realise the full implications of what was to follow. It was only after receiving the sop (v27) that Satan entered into him and propelled him relentlessly to the betrayal of the One he had followed for over three years and to suicide. What an awful end. From the intimacy of ‘heaven’ in the upper room to the eternal darkness of a lost eternity. Looking at this event what practical lesson can we learn? We recognise that while the laying aside of His garments speaks of His humility and grace in incarnation, it surely directs our minds to the right hand of the Majesty on high where He ministers to us with intercession and advocacy. Intercession for the frail ability of our humanity, and advocacy, when we sin and truly confess it. There is however the underlying truth of cleansing from the defilements of the way on a continuous basis. However, we ask ourselves, what did their Master mean

when he counselled, *“If I then your Lord and Master have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example that ye should also do as I have done to you.”* - v13-14? How can we in some way fulfil His command in this present day? The message can have lost nothing of its power and pathos over the centuries. And so as we reflect on all that He, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, has and is doing for us perhaps today and tomorrow we could begin by picking up the telephone, writing and sending a letter or knocking on a believer’s door and do a little bit of ‘feet washing’.

We must too, remember that one day soon He will appear as the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). That will be the consummation of all that He, in His grace, has called us to be and do for Him.

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