

Women's Bible Study  
I AM: The Good Shepherd  
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Good morning, welcome to Women's Bible Study. What a privilege it is to begin a new season of study together. Each fall brings a sense of new beginnings and change. I have been thinking a lot about the topic of change. Having just launched our oldest daughter to college, 9 hours and 500 miles away, each day seems to bring some type of challenge, opportunity, or adjustment.

Change is all around us. None one is immune from it. Every month it seems we have to adjust to some change in the processes and procedures that influence our day to day lives. Some are inconvenient like new computer systems at work, changes in billing procedures from companies with which we do business, businesses being bought, sold and changing their names. There are new technology upgrades for our computers, cell phones, and various personal computing devices. There are life changing events in our families: births, graduations, weddings, divorce, and death. There are new programs, initiatives, and buildings in our schools, community and even our church.

Change is all around us. This is particularly apparent to me when I try to explain an older product to my younger children ages 8 and 13. Try explaining what a typewriter is to a member of the computer savvy generation, or a rotary dial phone. They look at you as though you have presented a fictional story.

Despite the age of change and innovation in which we live, it amazes me how the Bible continually illustrates truth with timeless word pictures. These were used to teach generations thousands of years ago and are still understandable to us centuries later. The I AM Statements of Jesus are examples of this.

I AM the Bread of Life (John 6:35)  
I AM the Light of the World (John 8:12)  
I AM the Gate (John 10:9)  
I AM the Good Shepherd (John 10:11)  
I AM the Resurrection and the Life (John 11: 25-26)  
I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6)  
I AM the Vine (John 15:5)

The I AM Statement for our study this morning/evening is I AM The Good Shepherd. While you may not be intimately familiar with sheep and shepherds, many of you probably grew up on a farm or near a farm. Even if you consider yourself a city girl through and through, many areas throughout the world are still quite agrarian. So we can still understand the word picture.

Interestingly, the illustration of the Shepherd, with the 1st Century listener's knowledge of livestock and farming would have been easily understood. However, they would have been a little fuzzy on the application of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and the future events alluded to in the passages.

We on the other hand as Christians looking back on several thousand years of history have a greater grasp of these issues, but we need to brush up on the livestock portions of the illustration. So let's review a little history and cultural context of shepherding.<sup>1</sup>

## Life of a Shepherd

Shepherds were a common picture in the Middle East and in the Bible. If you type the words sheep or shepherd into a Bible search application you will hit on hundreds of verses containing these words. The first are in the Book of Genesis and the last is in the book of Revelation.

One of the Oldest Titles for God used in the Bible is that of Shepherd (Genesis 49:24). Probably the best known reference to God as our Shepherd is Psalm 23. God uses the example of a shepherd to describe the process and people who were to lead the nation. Many of our favorite Old Testament Heroes were given the assignment of Shepherd as the training ground to prepare them for the role of leading God's people. Most notably Moses and David served in this role.

The role of a shepherd was not a high position in the ancient world. David, the youngest, in his family, had this role. The children of Israel (remember Jacob and his sons) were shepherds and this was not highly regarded by the Egyptians. When Joseph instructed his father and brothers how to answer Pharaoh's question regarding their occupation he said, " <sup>34</sup>you should answer, 'Your servants have tended livestock from our boyhood on, just as our fathers did.' Then you will be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians."(Genesis 46:33-34)

The role of the shepherd was a hard and lonely one. The shepherd spent his time in the fields with his flocks. He slept with them. He protected them. He moved with them. He was exposed to the elements.

The shepherd had a very personal role with his sheep. He often named them and knew their particular characteristics. They would respond to his voice. The flocks of multiple shepherds could bed down together in the evenings without worry that they would be hopelessly intermingled because in the morning when the shepherd called his sheep they would follow only his voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Idea taken from Life Application Bible Commentary: John. Osborne, Grant. Series Editor. Tyndale House Publishers. Wheaton, Illinois. 1993. page 207

## Biblical Passage: John 10:11-21.

This morning/evening our text will be two passages from the Bible. One is from the New Testament and one from the Old Testament. Let's begin with the New Testament passage. It is John 10:11-21.

<sup>11</sup>"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. <sup>13</sup>The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

<sup>14</sup>"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

<sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. <sup>17</sup>The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

<sup>19</sup> At these words the Jews were again divided. <sup>20</sup>Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" <sup>21</sup>But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

In Chapter 9 Jesus had healed a blind man and the crowd is still processing that miracle. His critics classified him as demon possessed and raving mad. Others asked the reasonable question, "Is it the usual behavior of someone demon possessed to heal the blind?".

## Overarching Character Trait of the Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life

Jesus tells us in this passage that the overarching character trait of a good shepherd is that he lays down his life for his sheep. Shepherds commonly had to deal with wild animals that could cause catastrophic losses to the flock. There was also the threat of robbers. The Shepherd would risk his life to protect the sheep.

Jesus contrasts the role of the good shepherd with that of a hired hand. A hired hand does not have the same vested interest as the shepherd because he is not the owner of

the sheep. So when trouble comes, the hired hand abandons the sheep and runs away. He does that because he cares only for himself and nothing for the sheep. Jesus doesn't just risk his life, he lays down his life, he gives it up, he dies. This idea of risking one's life for the sheep was a common one, but the shepherd willingly giving up his life for the sheep is unheard of; it is not even a concept mentioned in the Old Testament<sup>2</sup>. Jesus chooses to lay down His life, no one takes it from Him.

He laid down his life once through His sacrifice on the cross as payment for our sins. Then He continues his care. He continually intercedes for us. He guides us by His gracious Spirit. He works on our behalf to ensure that we will benefit from His care.<sup>3</sup>

## Biblical Passage: Ezekiel 34 (Excerpts)

We are going to push pause here on our discussion of John 10 and take a look at our second passage. It is Ezekiel 34 beginning in Verse 1. The prophet Ezekiel is ministering to the captives who have been carried away by the Babylonians during the prolonged capture and destruction of Jerusalem. The nation is suffering the punishment of its many years of rejecting God. Here the focus is on their leaders.

<sup>1</sup>The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup>"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?

<sup>3</sup>You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. <sup>4</sup>You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. <sup>5</sup>So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. <sup>6</sup>My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

Although God is the ultimate shepherd, He had delegated this role of physical leadership and governance to the rulers in Israel. These leaders were mainly Kings, various political and religious leaders, and Priests. They were to function under God's authority, much like an under secretary would, yet they had failed.

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<sup>2</sup> Intersity Press New Commentary Series. John. Osborne, Grant R. Series Editor. Briscoe, D. Stuart and Robinson, Haddon Consulting Editors. Intersity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois. 1999. page 260.

<sup>3</sup> A Shepherd looks at the Psalm 23. Keller, Phillip. Zondervan Publishing. Grand Rapids, MI 1970. page 21.

## Overarching Character Trait of the Bad Shepherds Selfishness

The overarching character trait of the Bad Shepherds is selfishness. They only take care of themselves. God asks, "Should not shepherds take care of the flock?" The answer to the rhetorical question is of course they should take care of the flock. That is their responsibility. These shepherds only take care of themselves. They use the sheep for their own selfish purposes. They eat the curds (a by product of the milk used to make cheese), they use their wool to clothe themselves, and they slaughter the choice animals for meat. They do not take care of the flock, they take care of themselves. They are well fed and well clothed.

In addition they have not strengthened the weak, or healed the sick, or bound up the injured. They have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. As if that was not enough they have ruled the sheep harshly and brutally. The actions of the shepherds have resulted in the scattering of the flock, exposing them to all kinds of danger. The nation of Israel was without a shepherd. They were wandering all over the whole earth and no one seems to care.

That is quite a sobering indictment on the leaders of the nation of Israel. Sometimes it is tempting to listen to all the charges against the shepherds and think wow weren't they terrible leaders, glad we aren't like them. We miss a bit of the contrast in the passages between the Good Shepherd and the Bad Shepherds if we think only the Old Testament Leaders were guilty of neglect. They basically profited from a position of leadership and yet did not assume the responsibilities. Using that definition, I think all of us can relate on some level to our failures in that regard. I certainly can.

What about if we take it to another level? Have you ever profited from your role as a child of God, yet never assumed your responsibilities? Let's look at how the individual sheep did this to each other in the example. Beginning with verse 17:

<sup>17</sup>As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. <sup>18</sup>Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? <sup>19</sup>Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

The sheep themselves were mistreating one another. They would drink the clear water and then muddy it so that others could not drink it. They would feed on good pasture and then trample and ruin it for the others.

While we may not be charged with the responsibility of a shepherd, or even a leader we are all to be imitators of Christ, the Good Shepherd. While we don't lay down our lives for others in the same way that Christ did as a sacrifice for our sins, we have opportunities to lay down an attitude of selfishness each day. So why don't we act more like the Good Shepherd?

### Ignorance

I think there are four primary reasons. The first is we are ignorant. I have a friend who has honed the gift of seeing the needs of others to a fine art. I would like to say she is gifted, but that I think too easily lets all of us off the hook. I think she has invested a great deal of her time in her relationship with Christ and so she begins to see others with spiritual eyes and insight. We were talking one day and she confessed to me that she had done something she probably should not have. She had recently become friends with a family and they had asked her to drop something off at their home and had given her a key.

She said she was worried about them. And when I asked why she said, "Have you ever noticed what the children bring for lunch; it is very minimal especially for the children's ages". I had to admit I had never paid much attention to what any children brought to school for lunch even though I had worked as a parent volunteer.

She said, "I was worried and so I probably should not have done it, but I just had a feeling as I stood in their kitchen". She continued, "I opened the pantry, the place where most people would keep cereal, canned goods, and baking supplies and there was nothing and I mean nothing. So I opened the refrigerator and there was almost nothing there as well. It occurred to me it was the last week of the month and there probably wasn't money left to purchase food." And so she left, went to the grocery store, returned to the home, stocked the pantry and refrigerator and never said a word to any one.

Now, we can debate whether or not she should have been snooping in the cabinets, and she readily admits she should not have. But the lesson I took away from that conversation is how many times are there obvious needs in front of me that I am just not seeing? I am ignorant.

### Indifference

We can also be indifferent. We can be so focused on the needs of our family and friends, our schedules, that we see a need, but it just doesn't register to us. It just sort of passes in front of us as information, but is not evaluated as something that needs our attention.

## Indecisive

We can also be indecisive. We see a need, we take it in, maybe evaluate that something needs to be done, but we don't know what to do, or we don't know how to do it so we spin our wheels evaluating all the possible actions until we actually do nothing.

## Evil

Finally, we can be operating from an evil heart attitude. That is not very popular to say. In our modern culture we sometimes act like evil does not exist, but a quick scan of the headlines will remind us that evil is alive and well in our midst. Jesus alludes to this when he talks about the Bad Shepherds. They care nothing about the sheep, they merely use them for their own gain. The bad sheep also only care about themselves, and they take deliberate steps to harm those around them.

These were not acceptable excuses for the shepherds of Israel and they are not acceptable excuses for us. The Good Shepherd is never guilty of being ignorant of His people's suffering. He is not indifferent. He is not indecisive. He is never evil. He is the Good Shepherd.

## The Messiah is Coming

God not only notices the plight of His people, he also notices the neglect and evil actions of the shepherds entrusted to care for His people. He is not going to put up with this behavior forever. He tells the shepherds they are going to be punished and removed from their positions. Let's resume our reading at Verse 11.

<sup>11</sup>For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. <sup>12</sup>As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. <sup>13</sup>I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. <sup>14</sup>I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup>I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. <sup>16</sup>I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

skipping down to verse 23

<sup>23</sup>I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup>I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

skipping to verse 30

<sup>30</sup>Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Sovereign LORD. <sup>31</sup>You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

## The Messiah has Come

That is a lot of I statements. The coming of the Messiah is being announced. God is speaking through the prophet and letting His people know that he sees their suffering and neglect. He will come and be their shepherd. Back to the gospel of John Chapter 10.

<sup>11</sup>“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

<sup>14</sup>“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Jesus is telling them he is the Messiah and in him God himself has come to shepherd His people. He is the one foretold long ago. The people however rejected Jesus. They did not accept him as their Messiah, and so the nation and the blessings that were promised are held in trust for a future date, while those other sheep Jesus referred to (the nonJewish believers, the Gentiles, we) are brought into the fold under the leadership of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

## The Messiah will Come Again

And so we wait for His Second Coming, which will be quite different than the first. You can read all about it in the New Testament and perhaps we will touch on it in subsequent lectures. But while we wait we act in the way the Good Shepherd has taught us as contrasted with the Bad Shepherds. We reflect on what the Good Shepherd has done for us. He died as payment for our sins on the Cross. He cares for us personally and intimately. We realize that it is a gift. It is not a gift that we deserve or that we can earn through good behavior. It is a gift that we accept or reject.

In grateful appreciation and with the recognition that we have been forgiven and cleansed from our sins we pray for spiritual eyes and a heart to serve. We learn to see others as my friend does and be the very hands and feet of Christ. We do this not

because we are guilt ridden or anxiety plagued to do our part, but because we are willing servants ready to share in the work our Lord has given us.

Finally, we obey. When God shows us ways he wants us to serve and others he wants us to shepherd, we obey and fulfill the responsibilities we have been given.

And so I ask you, Who do you say Jesus is? Some in the crowd thought he was demon possessed, some thought he was raving mad. Some could see with spiritual eyes that he was the Messiah, the Good Shepherd, promised through the prophet Ezekiel. What about you? Will you reject him as those in the First Century did and thus forfeited many blessings? Or will you accept him as the Messiah with all the rights and privileges of a Child of God, and the responsibilities as well? Who do you say I AM?