

SM036 The Good Shepherd

It was the Feast of Hanukkah in Israel. The weather was chilly and not many pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem for this celebration. But in the Temple, priests would gather to read Scripture to remember those great events that had happened almost 200 years before. Throughout the land God's people would also remember the heroic deeds of God's leaders who had freed the people from the oppression of the Greeks.

The Jews, for hundreds of years had been ruled by the great empires of the world. First, it was the Babylonians, the destroyers of Solomon's temple and the conquerors of Jerusalem. Then, the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians. The Persians allowed the Jews to return to their land and rebuild the temple and the city, but they had to remain loyal to their Persian overlords. After the Persians came the Greeks led by Alexander the Great. He created an empire stretching from Greece to India and after his death, his empire was divided into different regions led by different generals – but one characteristic bound them together – Greek language and culture.

The Greeks believed their culture to be superior to every other culture of the world and they never failed to introduce it to people and to expect people to conform to their ways. But one Greek ruler went too far. His name was Antiochus IV and he added the blasphemous title to his name – Epiphanes – God manifest. Antiochus increased pressure on all people under his reign, including Israel, and he demanded that all men worship the gods of the Greeks and follow Greek customs.

What did this mean for Israel? Antiochus said that Jewish parents could no longer circumcise their male children. Circumcision was the ritual for every young male infant. It was the symbolic way of entering into the covenant God made with Abraham. Antiochus demanded that the Jews destroy all copies of their Scriptures! The Laws of Moses? The prophets? The writings? Yes, it was forbidden to read the Hebrew Scriptures.

But as awful as these new laws were, the greatest desecration was to follow. Antiochus entered into the Temple of Israel and into the inner court where sacrifices were made. It was bad enough that he, a Gentile, would enter a place where no Gentile was supposed to stand, but Antiochus offered a sacrifice upon the altar and the sacrificial animal was a pig. Pigs were unclean. They were not to be eaten or touched and especially not to be offered on the altar of God. Then, Antiochus set up an image of the Greek god Zeus and demanded that all bow to him.

The situation had gone too far! It was time to act. An old priest by the name of Mattathias called for revolution and the war was on – a little band of untrained, Jewish men going up against the mighty armies of Antiochus. But God was on the side of his people and after three years of war, they prevailed against the pagan armies. They cleansed the temple and established independence. When the Jews went to light the sacred lampstand in the Temple, they found only enough oil for one day. The lamps were never to go out. How could they keep them lit? But the oil miraculously lasted for eight days until a fresh supply could be found for the light in the Temple.

The Feast of Hanukkah or Dedication as it is called in John 10 was the commemoration of those great events that had happened two hundred years previous. As part of their celebration, they would read passages from the prophets that talked about why troubles had come upon God's people. And among the many reasons why trouble came to God's people was the wicked leaders among God's people who were like shepherds who led the flock astray and caused them to be scattered.

This was one of the main reasons why the temple had been destroyed in the first place by the Babylonians. The prophet Jeremiah said:

"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!" declares the LORD. ²Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: "You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds," declares the LORD.

Ezekiel said the same:

Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, ²"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? ³You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat *sheep* without feeding the flock. ⁴Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. ⁵They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. ⁶My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek *for them*.'"

⁷Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸"As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but *rather* the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock; ⁹therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.'"

It was passages like these that God's people read. The shepherd kings and shepherd priests had not been faithful in leading the people. This is why the calamities had come upon the people of God. This is why the Babylonians had conquered the city and why Antiochus IV had caused such grief and suffering in the land. And now the Romans were in charge.

When would God send his Messiah – the true shepherd of Israel? When would God send this faithful shepherd to reign over his people and lead them to victory? When Jeremiah and Ezekiel had prophesied against the false shepherds had they not also spoken of a true shepherd who would come?

Jeremiah said:

Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will also raise

up shepherds over them and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD.

⁵"Behold, *the days are coming*," declares the LORD,
"When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch;
And He will reign as king and act wisely
And do justice and righteousness in the land.
⁶"In His days Judah will be saved,
And Israel will dwell securely;
And this is His name by which He will be called,
'The LORD our righteousness.'

There was no mistaking it. God had promised a deliverer. God had promised a true shepherd to lead his people. Ezekiel said the same:

¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. ¹²As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶"I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment.

One day, Jesus was in Jerusalem. Crowds had gathered around him as usual. In the crowds were people hungry for the truth and for help. And in the crowds were people who were suspicious of Jesus and even some who wanted to hand him over to the authorities. After all, had not Jesus caused trouble in Israel? Had he not just recently healed a blind man on the Sabbath? It was great that the blind man saw, but why did Jesus have to do it on the Sabbath. And why did Jesus claim to be the light of the world and the one who would give the water of life? He had even used the name of God for himself. The people were divided over Jesus.

On this day, during this season when people were remembering the great deliverance from the Greek oppression and would remember it by reading passages about the false shepherds and true, Jesus raised his voice in the Temple and said:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. ²But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. ³To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers."

⁶This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them.

⁷So Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. ⁹I am the door; if

anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have *it* abundantly.

¹¹"I 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 is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters *them*. ¹³*He flees* because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, ¹⁵even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. ¹⁸No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

When Jesus finished saying these things, some people in the crowd were saying, "This man is insane and is in league with evil spirits. He is claiming to be the true shepherd of Israel. He is claiming to fulfill the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Why are you listening to him?"

But others were saying, "How can you say he has an evil spirit? Did not the prophecies say he would seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick? This is what Jesus has done, and he even gave sight to a blind man! A demon can't do that!"

Who was right? Was Jesus insane? Or was he the true shepherd of Israel? When we come back we will answer these questions and more!

Interlude

The image of a shepherd was common in the land of Israel. Throughout the land people would see shepherds leading their flocks to good feeding places. They would see them leading the sheep to sheepfolds at night, the sheepfolds made of rocks, bricks, mud, or even thorn bushes, and they would hear stories of the bravery of the true shepherds who would lay down their lives to save one of their flock against predators. Sometimes, hired hands would watch sheep, but they could not be relied on to protect them against wild animals.

The good shepherds in Israel were a picture of the kinds of leaders God wanted for his people. The bad shepherds, the hired hands, were the kinds of leaders who did not protect the flock. How the people longed for the true shepherd of Israel to come!

And when Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd," the people knew exactly who he was claiming to be. Let's take a few moments and examine in detail what Jesus said.

First, Jesus talked about the way shepherds would care for their sheep in wilderness areas. They would not dare keep them out in the open fields at night. They would have to make an enclosure for them of stones, mud, and even thorn bushes and would stand guard at the door way so no predator could enter. Sometimes predators would circle around the sheepfold at night, looking for a point of weakness, and if it found one, it would jump over this place and attack the sheep.

And the same was true spiritually! The true spiritual leader of God's people would enter by the door of the sheep and the sheep would recognize his voice and follow him. The true spiritual leader would not circle around and try to enter the sheepfold and harm the sheep but he would come right to the door, call out his voice and the sheep would follow him.

And this is why Jesus said: "I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Jesus was openly challenging the religious rulers of this day. He was saying that they were the thieves and robbers of the people, and as the thieves and robbers their only purpose was to enrich themselves on the sheep – to steal from them, to kill them, and destroy them. Jeremiah had warned against such leaders and Jesus was warning the people against the false leaders of his day who were leading the people astray and pointing people to himself. He had come to give abundant life to his flock.

But how could people know if his claims were true? This leads to the second point of Jesus' parable. Jesus contrasted himself with them by saying he was the good shepherd and they were just a bunch of hired hands who did not care for the sheep. Jesus said:

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters *them*. ¹³ *He flees* because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me,

And friends, this is how we know that Jesus was not an imposter, that he was the true shepherd, and that he is the one we should follow. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. Jesus came to heal. Jesus gave sight to the blind. Jesus told people to follow him. And when, at the end of his ministry he came to Jerusalem, he could have run. He could have easily escaped, but he laid down his life and died on a Roman cross. In that death, he paid for our sins, and through that death, you and I can find forgiveness and receive eternal life.

During the feast of Dedication, which we know today as the Feast of Hanukkah where Israel was celebrating the victory of God's people over evil forces and reading about good shepherds vs. false shepherds, Jesus was in the temple walking in the porch of Solomon. This was a narrow porch on the eastern edge of the Temple and it overlooked the Kidron Valley. The crowds gathered around him and they said

"How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me."

The people thought on what he had done. He had healed a blind man. It was remarkable. He had delivered a woman from her sin. That was remarkable as well. In addition to these mighty works in Jerusalem, he had performed countless other works which the people had seen or heard about. What more did they need?

But Jesus knew what the people needed. They needed a true relationship with the God of Israel. They claimed to be the people of God, they claimed to be of the sheep of Israel, but they were not. Jesus continued.

“You do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

“I and the Father are one! How can you say this,” some of the people screamed. “That’s blasphemy,” and some in the crowd picked up stones to stone Him.

Jesus answered them, “I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?”

And the people said, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out *to be* God.”

Jesus shook his head and said, “Look, in your own Law, the messengers of God are sometimes called gods – not that they are, but they are called that to express their divine authority. Now, if the Scripture called them that, mere messengers, why are you upset if I say that I am my Father are One. I say that that He and I are One because he has set me apart and sent me into the world. I do the works of my Father. If you will not believe me, then look at the works that I do and believe me because of the works. But you must believe that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.”

And while many did believe him, some did not, and they tried to arrest him, but they could not because it was not yet his time.

But my friend, the question I leave you with today is this – do you believe? Do you believe that Jesus and Father in heaven are one? Do you believe that Jesus came from heaven? Do you believe that he was and is the Good Shepherd? Which way will you go – will you pick up stones to stone him, or will you confess him as your Shepherd and follow him?

Ending