

### **A closer analysis of Jesus' sheep/shepherd analogy (in John 10)**

The tenth chapter of John records a conversation between Jesus and the Jews during which He used an analogy of sheep and a shepherd. This article is written to explain some things about this conversation that you may not know. But before those things are discussed, it is necessary to review the basic story in order to lay a proper foundation.

In **10:2-5**,<sup>1</sup> Jesus talks about an unidentified shepherd and his sheep just to illustrate how a good shepherd relates to his sheep and how the sheep respond to him. From these verses, you can learn the following basic facts about sheep and shepherding. A good shepherd has a relationship with his sheep. He calls them by names that he gives to them. The sheep know his voice because he is always with them. He knows where they should go to find a safe place to graze. The sheep trust him. So, when he calls them by name, they follow him out of the sheep pen to wherever he leads them. The sheep do not trust other people. They are not used to their voice. So, if a stranger calls them, they will flee away from him.

Anyone acquainted with shepherding sheep that was listening to Jesus that day would have understood this. Jesus was not saying anything new. He was using common knowledge about sheep and shepherding to convey important spiritual truth. But the Jews were not understanding the point of what He was telling them. (*"This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them"- John 10:6 ESV.*)

Later in the conversation (**10:27-29**), Jesus tells the Jews how this common knowledge about sheep and shepherding relate to some very important spiritual truths about Himself and those that He calls "His sheep." Those that He calls "His sheep" may be likened unto the actual sheep He described in 10:2-5. Before saying what He said in 10:27-29, He said, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"* (John 10:11 ESV). He did not say, "I am a good shepherd." He said, "I am THE good shepherd."

The shepherd He described in 10:2-5 was a good shepherd. Jesus was every bit as good as the typical good shepherd. But in 10:27-29, Jesus tells us some things about Himself that no other shepherd could ever claim, no matter how good they were as shepherds. Even the best of shepherds lose sheep on occasion. A wolf might kill one. A sheep may get sick and die. A crafty thief might steal one. But THE Good Shepherd gives His sheep eternal life so that they never die! No wolf or even a human thief will ever snatch a single sheep from The Good Shepherd.

The Jews did not understand why Jesus first spoke to them about sheep and shepherding. Perhaps after hearing what He said in 10:27-29, they then understand its relevance to what Jesus was trying to tell them. But clearly, from the verses that followed, they completely rejected what Jesus was trying to tell them and they were extremely offended.

### **What more can be gleaned from the things Jesus said in this passage?**

Having laid a general foundation, let me now point out some things that you may not know concerning this passage. These things have to do with Jesus' sheep.

I suspect that many Christians understand Jesus' analogy in 10:2-5 as picturing something that includes regeneration and conversion. Here is how many Christians understand Jesus' analogy found in 10:3-5: The sheep are in a pen with a bunch of other sheep. Then, suddenly, they hear the shepherd call them (by their names) and follow as he leads them out of the pen. From that point on, the sheep follow the shepherd. So, to many Christians, this analogy pictures what happens in the regeneration and conversion process. Contrary to what many Christians think about this analogy, there is textual evidence which suggests that Jesus' analogy did not include a sequence of events that include regeneration and conversion. To illustrate, let me provide a more accurate translation of these passages.

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<sup>1</sup> "To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10:3-5 ESV).

<sup>2</sup> "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup> 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" (John 10:27-29 ESV).

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<sup>3</sup>“The doorkeeper opens the door for this one. And the sheep constantly listen to his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and he leads them out. <sup>4</sup>And whenever he drives out his own sheep, he goes before them and the sheep continuously follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>But another’s voice they do not follow, but they will flee from him because they do not know another’s voice” (John 10:2-5).

<sup>27</sup>My sheep listen to My voice (and continue to listen to My voice). I know them and they follow Me (and continue to follow Me). <sup>28</sup>Even so, I give them everlasting Life and they will never perish, and no one can snatch them from My hand. <sup>29</sup>My Father who has given them to Me is greater than all and no one is able to snatch them from My Father’s hand. <sup>30</sup>I and the Father are One” (John 10:27-29).

I don’t know why, but most of the translations translate the Greek word ἀκούει as “hear.” (“The sheep “hear” his voice.”) To the typical English-speaking person, the word “hear” conveys action that is passive in nature. The sheep were minding their own business when suddenly, the shepherd’s voice comes floating into their ears and they hear it. The problem with this translation (most English versions) is that the verb is in the active voice, not the passive voice. Therefore, this Greek word is more accurately translated “listen to.” (Interestingly, the NIV translates it correctly as “listen to.”)

In addition to the active voice of this Greek verb, it is also Greek present tense along with the word “follow.” This is just one of over **30 times**<sup>3</sup> that John (in his gospel) intentionally chose to use Greek present tense verb forms in soteriological contexts to purposely convey a continuance aspect (customary Greek **present tense**<sup>4</sup>).

Because these verb forms are in the active voice and express action that is happening and never stops, we can gain a solid understanding about the nature of Jesus’ sheep. They have their ears tuned to the shepherd’s voice at all times. They are not doing their own thing, minding their own business until such time that the shepherd’s voice just happens to float into their ears. No. Instead, they are continually and actively listening for His voice as if their life depends on hearing it. Upon hearing His voice, they immediately and continuously follow His leading.

This is not at all how unbelievers behave. They could care less about what Jesus wants and they certainly have no desire to follow His directions. Therefore, this passage is not talking about what happens to unbelievers in the regeneration and conversion process. Instead, this passage only talks about the nature of those who are believing (Jesus’ sheep). They are continuously (right now) listening to Jesus and continuously (right now) following where He is leading them. Therefore, in John 10:3-5 and 27-29, Jesus is NOT explaining what happens in the regeneration and conversion process. He is merely giving us information about how His sheep (true believers) continuously relate to Him. These are the ones that will never perish.

What a glorious truth – not a single one of Jesus’ sheep will be lost. But take heed. If you fail to persevere, you will prove yourself to be NOT one of Jesus’ sheep. If you turn away from Him, you will perish. Jesus commands you to remain in His love. (See John 15:9 and Jude 1:21.) These commands are in the active voice, Therefore, remaining in His love and keeping yourself in His love are things you MUST actively do. Are you actively striving to remain in His love? If not, you are not paying attention to Jesus’ direct command to you. Let us fervently pray for ourselves and each other about this. Jesus alone has the power to keep us. But let us not be negligent to ask Him to do so.

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<sup>3</sup> John 1:12; 3:15, 16, 18, 21, 36; 4:36; 5:23, 24; 6:35, 37, 40, 47, 54, 56, 57, 58, 64; 7:38; 8:12; 10:3,4 27, 28; 11:25, 26; 12:25, 46, 48; 13:20; 14:21; 15:2, 5; 20:31.

<sup>4</sup> Customary Greek present tense (in indicative verbs and participles) convey action that is currently going on and never stops. Sometimes Greek present tense verbs do not convey continuance depending on other factors. For example, embedded in the meaning of some verbs is more of an instantaneous aspect. However, a faithful student will always understand present tense verb forms to convey continuance UNLESS there is good reason not to do so. (This is especially true when the N.T. author chose present tense when he had other tense options available that do not convey a continuance aspect.) Again, the good student will assume that the author is conveying action that is happening and never stops UNLESS there are other factors that suggest the author did not want to convey the continuance aspect.