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WHEN EVEN THE LIONS GROW WEAK AND HUNGRY

John 10:11-42

Did you hear that Hollywood is making a movie about a macho sheep that heroically rescues people? It’s called *Lambo*. Uh, don’t expect it at a theater near you any time soon. Do you know what make of car sheep like to drive? They favor Lamborghinis.

Sheep are interesting creatures. There’s a woman named Ginny Neil who has had some adventures raising sheep along with her husband. She says that sheep sometimes have an interesting reaction to light at night. One night she was driving home, and as she came around the last curve of their driveway her headlights shined on about 20 of their sheep standing in the way. When they saw the lights they charged at the car. One after another they slammed head first into the grill of her car, then staggered aside to let others have a shot. She tried honking her horn to warn them away, but that just caused them to speed up. Her car rocked from the impact as one by one every one of the ewes pounded into it. Finally, when they were all sprawled on the edge of the driveway she eased her car past them and drove to her house. They staggered up and followed her to the house. Maybe that’s why when *National Geographic* did a story on sheep they titled it *Butt Heads*. When Ginny got in the house she told her husband what had happened. He said, “Sheep are always looking for an excuse to die.”

Psalm 95:7 says of God, “He is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.” It’s not real flattering that God compared us to sheep. But perhaps it’s something we need to learn from. Sheep, as Mr. Neil said, are always looking for an excuse to die, meaning they seem to make choices that are not for their own good, so they need shepherds to save them from themselves. We humans also seem to have a penchant for doing what is not in our own best interest, and need someone to save us from ourselves. We also need a shepherd. Today we are going to learn about the best shepherd that we could ever have, one that we all need. In order to make sure we don’t do the human equivalent of running head first into a car, let’s look at John 10:11-42.

Chapters 9-10 in John have centered on the contrast and conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel. In verses 1-10 we saw that Jesus essentially said the Pharisees, who were supposed to be the shepherds of Israel, were actually thieves and robbers. They did not care about the sheep, but about themselves. That conflict and the contrast in leadership continues throughout chapter 10.

PREMISE: JESUS IS OUR GREAT SHEPHERD

Jesus’ statement in verse 11 that he is the good shepherd is the theme of this section of Scripture. God’s people at that time had compromised leaders. As religious as they looked, the leaders of that day were not serving God, but were pursuing their own ends. The religious leaders were the thieves and robbers mentioned in verse 2, but Jesus was the real deal, the true shepherd. There are some key ideas that Jesus highlighted in this section.

*He sacrifices for his sheep*

Jesus said in verse 11 that he laid down his life for his sheep. He sacrifices himself for his sheep. He repeated that in verse 15 where he said, “I lay down my life for the sheep.” This was in contrast to someone hired to tend the sheep. When a mountain lion attacks the sheep the hired help isn’t going to put his life at risk by trying to fight off the animal. He’s going to say, “You don’t pay me enough for that.” But the shepherd who owns the sheep and cares for each one, will go to great lengths to protect his sheep, even putting himself at risk if necessary.

Years ago I saw a picture of this in an odd way. We rented a home in Encinitas for years. I did what I could to keep the property up, but I wasn’t going to expend a lot of money and effort taking care of the property of someone who was making a lot of money off of me paying him rent. I noticed I could walk around the neighborhood and pick out the homes where a renter lived. They weren’t kept up as nicely as were the homes of the owners. Jesus cares for his own sheep, even at enormous cost to himself.

In verse 18 he said he laid down his life of his own accord, no one forced him to do it. This obviously was referring to the fact that Jesus was going to die for us. His audience didn’t understand what he meant, but his followers later would see it in retrospect, just as we can today. It was going to appear to everyone that his life was forcibly taken from him. But Jesus said that was his very reason for coming into the world. He came specifically to give up his life for us.

Jesus made a controversial statement that his sheep included “other sheep who are not of this sheep pen.” In other words, who weren’t Jewish. He was claiming Gentiles would be part of his flock. That statement alone would have angered the religious leaders and caused them to claim he was crazy, or worse, he was heretical and evil.

Jesus contrasted himself with the “thieves and robbers” in verse 2. He was accusing his opponents of being those thieves and robbers. The thief doesn’t care about the sheep. He only seeks to enrich himself. Jesus said that’s exactly what the religious establishment of Israel was doing. In Matthew 23:5 Jesus said of the Pharisees, “Everything they do is done for people to see.” In verses 6-7 he said, “they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.’” Everything they did, no matter how religious it looked, was done for themselves. They were not about the glory of God, they were about their own pride. They didn’t care for the sheep, they cared for themselves. Jesus was the exact opposite. He cared for the sheep to the point of totally sacrificing himself for them.

*He knows his sheep*

In verse 14 he said, “I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” He has a relationship with the sheep. Each one of them matters to him. In Luke 15:4-6 Jesus said, “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me, I have found my lots sheep.’”

That’s how Jesus, the Great Shepherd, relates to us, his sheep. He knows each one of us individually. We are not a faceless, nameless mass to him. We are individuals. He knows each one of us, and each one of us matters to him. How do you like being insignificant? How do you like the fact that your social security number is more important than your name? I do not like being a number. I hate being treated like just another one of the mass of people on the planet, but to the world, that’s all I am.

I have told you before about something that happened to Laurie and me that made me much aware of how much I want to be an individual person who matters. When we were about to go on a vacation some friends gave us a gift card to a very nice restaurant where we were going. It was a very thoughtful, gracious gift. While we were on vacation we went to that restaurant. The card included instructions that we were to hand it to our server before we ordered. So when we were seated I said, “We were given this gift card and are supposed to give it to you.” He looked at it for a moment, and then he surprised us. He said, “Oh! Are you Rick and Laurie Myatt?” It had our names on the card, but he seemed to think this important. I said, “Yes, we are.” He said, “We have a board in the kitchen with important notices, and it has had your names on it for a couple of weeks. We are supposed to be keeping an eye out for you if you came in.” We got really good service that evening. Apparently our friends knew the owner of the restaurant and asked him to give us special attention when we came. I have to tell you it felt really good to be noticed and treated as someone that mattered, even more than a usual customer. I thought that I would kind of like that all the time.

Jesus is the shepherd who knows you and me. When we talk to him about the little details of our lives, matters the larger world around us would not even take note of and would consider trivial and of zero importance, the Great Shepherd knows all about it and cares. He cares about each one of us.

*He keeps his sheep safe*

Jesus made a profoundly important statement in verses 29-30 that has to do with keeping his sheep safe. He said, “My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” He talked about the Father in the third person as the one who cannot be overcome because he is greater than all. Then he said, “I and the Father are one.” Some people would like to say, “Jesus and the Father were on the same page. They were in agreement about what should happen.” Laurie and I are one. When we got married the pastor said the two should become one, and we have. But we all know we’re still two different people. Is that what Jesus meant? He and the Father were totally united, though two different people?

That would be easy for us to understand, but it isn’t what Jesus meant. This is back to the mystery of the nature of God, three persons, one being. We know that by the reaction of those who heard Jesus make that statement. In verse 31 John tells us, “Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him.” Why were they doing that? In verse 33 they said, “We are not stoning you for any good work, but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.” They understood him to be saying he was God. They were correct. Notice Jesus didn’t say, “No, you misunderstand me. I’m not saying that.” He didn’t correct them because that was exactly what he meant. And the point is, Jesus said because he is God no one can snatch his sheep out of his hands. Who is greater than God? Who is stronger than him? There was a book published in 1955 that later was adapted into a movie and a play called *The Mouse That Roared*. It told the tale of a fictional tiny country in Europe called the Duchy of Grand Fenwick, whose economy was nearly bankrupt. The country, only 3 by 5 miles, noted how after the US defeated Germany and Japan in World War 2 we spent enormous sums of money rebuilding them. They hatched a plan to declare war on the US, which they would lose, then the US would rebuild their shattered economy. So they sent a force of 24 men armed with bows and arrows to invade New York. The whole plot was, of course, fanciful and satirical, but consider how absurd 24 men armed with bows and arrows would appear going up against the most powerful military force on the planet. How well would they fare? Do you think anyone in our country would be concerned if somehow Liechtenstein, with its population of 38,000 people and no military, declared war on the USA? That is kind of the image of anyone seeking to defeat God and steal away his sheep, because compared to Almighty God, everyone else in existence is Liechtenstein. Who can pry sheep away from his grip? The answer is no one.

Sometimes Christians worry that they are somehow going to lose their acceptance by God. Jesus said if you believe in him, you are a member of his flock, you are one of his sheep. And no one can change that. No one can take you away from him. You are totally, 100% safe and secure in his arms, and nothing will ever change that. But what if I mess up? What if I do something terrible? Are you stronger than God? Can you rip yourself away from him? The answer is no. Nothing can separate you from his love.

IMPLICATIONS

Jesus is our shepherd. We are sheep who need someone to care for us, watch over us, protect us and lead us. Jesus is that shepherd. What can we expect from our shepherd? Think about Psalm 23, the Shepherd Psalm. It tells us how the Great Shepherd takes care of us.

***He provides for us***

Remember how Psalm 23 begins. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.” I like the older, more lyrical translation, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” But “I lack nothing” does get the message across. Our shepherd is going to see to it that we lack nothing we truly need, nothing good. A good shepherd sees to it that the sheep lie down in green pastures beside quiet waters. They have plenty to eat and drink. We have what we need.

In Philippians 4:19 Paul wrote, “My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.” He didn’t mean that God is always going to make us rich. He wrote in verse 12, “I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty.” There had been times in Paul’s life when he was hungry and didn’t have enough to eat. Yet he said that God had always provided for him. The fact is, he did not starve. Maybe there had been lean times, but there was always enough.

Psalm 34:9-10 says, “Fear the Lord, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.” When it comes to predators, lions are at the top of the list. They are powerful, awesome animals that no one wants to tangle with. But that Psalm says when times are so hard even the most powerful are weak and hungry, God will give those who seek him what they need.

We think one of our greatest needs is to have enough money to fund our lives. But there are ways we can get more money. We can work harder or smarter, hustle a little more. But how can we deal with the fact that we are guilty before God and separated from him? There’s literally nothing we can do to fix that. That is a huge, intractable problem. But God has solved that for us through Jesus. He has provided what we need to be forgiven and loved by God forever. If God is both willing and able to provide for our need in our greatest and most difficult problem, should we be surprised that he has promised to provide our other needs as well? Those issues are much more easily solved than the one he has already solved in Jesus.

Laurie and I are living proof that the Great Shepherd provides for his sheep. I went through a couple of astounding incidents when I was in college and again in seminary when I simply did not have the money to go on, and in astounding ways, really miraculous ways, God provided what I needed. When Laurie and I began serving in ministry in this area we early on realized we weren’t going to be able to survive here long term financially. We figured we’d last as long as we could and when we ran out of money we’d go somewhere cheaper to live. We have now been here 44 years. God has provided all along. We had one moment when, because of an error by our accountant, we discovered we had a big tax bill and no money to pay it. We thought this was it, the moment when we were going to have to leave because we were out of money. Once again, God provided that money in an astounding way. When our daughter was graduating from high school we came up with a plan to get her through one year of college, as long as everything went right. Nothing went right. All the things we needed to happen to get her through that one year did not happen. Yet somehow, God worked it out in a variety of ways that our kids both graduated from college with no debt, and we didn’t have to sell the farm to do it. Now we are looking down the road at the possibility that at some point I will have to retire and our plan is laughable. It is not far from “Come quickly, Lord Jesus.” But what we know is that the Shepherd who has always provided for us will continue to lead us to green pastures.

***He restores our souls***

There is something else we see in Psalm 23 about how the Shepherd cares for us. Verse 3 says “He refreshes my soul.” I’m not sure how shepherds refresh the souls of sheep, but I know that our Great Shepherd refreshes the souls of those in his flock. In Matthew 11:28-29 Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” In his book, *The Rest Of God*, Mark Buchanan wrote, “I am going to be bold enough to assume…that you are just plain tired and often overwhelmed.” He assumes this because, he says, we live “in a culture where busyness is a fetish and stillness is laziness, rest is sloth.”

He’s right. In an article in *The New Republic* several years ago Hannah Rosefield discussed how being busy and tired is now a status symbol. She said in our culture, “to say that you’re exhausted is to telegraph that you’re important, in demand and successful.” In his book, *Every Good Endeavor*, Tim Keller wrote, “For many of us, being productive and doing becomes an attempt at redemption. That is, through our work we try to build our worth, security and meaning.” The effort is sapping joy, strength, enthusiasm and life from us. It is eroding our souls.

Life has become so complex, so fast, and so demanding. To make things even worse we have information overloading us. I read this week that on average people in our nation touch, swipe and tap on our screens 2,617 times every day! It is wearing us out. Think of David, who wrote Psalm 23 out of his own experience as a young shepherd. He spent many days out in the field watching over the sheep. He had lots of time on his hands with little to do. It would have often been quiet, and he would have had time to think, to experience the beauty of nature, to commune with God with no pressure on him. What a contrast to our modern culture where we rush around in our cars at high speed, have far more to do in a day that we can possibly accomplish, are constantly distracted by our phones, and collapse exhausted into bed at the end of stressful days, but despite how tired we are we can’t sleep because our minds are stressed and going a million miles an hour.

We were at a birthday party for our granddaughter Cara last night. It was at Corvette Diner at Liberty Station. Have you been there? To say it’s loud in there would be a bit like saying it gets warm in Phoenix in July. True, but doesn’t really convey the reality. It’s an unrelenting wall of sound. It’s like having a bowling alley inside your head. I figured that maybe it just affects old people like me. But when dinner was over and we walked outside 7 year old Ella said, “I can hear my mind.” That diner is like our culture, unrelenting in bombarding us to the point we can hardly hear our own minds.

Does anybody think this is good for us? We need rest. Rest from trying to justify our existence and establish our worth with our busyness and accomplishments. Rest from the pressure and stress of having to measure up to our standards, to the opinions of others, even from trying to convince ourselves that we are good enough for God to love us. In Matthew 11:28 Jesus spoke of rest from the futile effort of trying so hard to prove that we deserve approval because we do everything right. Jesus said we should trust in what he said and did for us, and when we do we can finally rest and be at peace. This is what will refresh our souls, and boy, they need refreshing.

***He guides us***

Psalm 23:3 says, “He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.” Again I like the older, “He leads me in the paths of righteousness.” Ancient middle eastern shepherds didn’t drive their sheep. They led them. They walked before them, showing them the way to go. The sheep would follow them to the pastures and watering holes that they needed and then to the safety of the sheep pen. A good shepherd would guide his sheep in part for his name’s sake. By guiding them where to go he would insure a healthy flock, and the health of the sheep would show him to be a good shepherd.

Psalm 32:8 says, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.” Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

The Shepherd guides us by showing us the right way to live, making clear what kind of people we should be. If we will trust him, obey what he tells us to do, then follow him as he guides us through life, he will indeed make our paths straight. He will get us where we need to go. Do you believe that God can and does actually guide you through life? People long for that. Journalist Anna Merlan has written a book titled *Republic Of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists*. One chapter is about the psychology behind UFO conspiracy theories. She says the conversation about UFO’s “says something about human hopes. About our desire to not be alone in the universe…and our wish for some wise and mysterious force out there in the farthest reaches of space that is ready to show us the way.” She quotes on UFO expert who says the obsession with UFOs “Expresses our secret longings for a wisdom that might come down from the stars in new, improved, easy to use packaging, to reveal the secrets of life and tell us, at long last, who we are.”

People are longing for someone to guide them. To tell them who they are, to show them the way to live and to get through this life. Alien beings aren’t the answer. The Great Shepherd is the answer. He guides us, shows us who we are, tells us how to live and even guides us through our many days.

Can God really guide us? Does he? I believe he does. The Bible seems to say he does. There’s the story of Philip in Acts 8. He was playing a key leadership role in a powerful movement in Samaria of people putting faith in Jesus. In the middle of this God told him to leave and go to a desert road in Gaza. It made no sense. But he went, and when he got there God told him to go talk to one guy in a chariot. He led that man to faith in Jesus.

Laurie and I have a somewhat bizarre engagement story. On my birthday 44 years ago we came to the conclusion that though we knew we loved each other, it seemed we had no place to go. Laurie was young and not ready for any commitments. We reluctantly agreed it just didn’t seem to be God’s plan for us to be together. The next day through some unusual circumstances we ended up talking in Laurie’s car in the parking lot before our classes started. As much as I didn’t want to, I was trying to encourage Laurie by telling her all the things God might want to do with her life apart from me. In the middle of all that, suddenly I asked her, “Will you marry me?” It was bizarre because I had no intention of saying that. In fact, I was appalled those words came out of my mouth because we had already decided that was not going to happen. I immediately began to try tell her to disregard that question and to apologize, when Laurie turned bright right and said with a huge grin, “Yes!” I did not know it, but as I had been trying to encourage her, she was thinking, “Without Rick, all of that just seems empty. He’s what I want.” So she prayed. She asked God for guidance. She prayed, “God, if you want me to marry Rick, please have him ask me right now.” Instantly my idiotic proposal popped out of my mouth. I have never really known how to explain that, except that God guided us into what has been the most joyful and wonderful thing we have ever done.

***He protects us***

One last thing the Shepherd does is protect the sheep. Psalm 23:4 says, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” The shepherd is there, and as long as he is with the sheep they feel safe. They know he will take care of them.

Sheep, because they are vulnerable, are really skittish. A flock of a couple hundred sheep can be spooked and sent into a panic by sudden appearance of a darting jackrabbit. The rabbit startles one sheep, who runs in panic, and the rest of the flock follows, assuming there is a reason to be afraid. The best deterrent for that kind of panic is for the shepherd to be there with the sheep.

In Deuteronomy 31:6 shortly before he died, Moses told Israel as they were given a second chance to enter Canaan after they failed to attempt it 40 years earlier, “Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Joshua was given a similar message in Joshua 1:9, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” David wrote in Psalm 27:1, “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” Isaiah 41:10 says, “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” The Shepherd is with us, so we can be at peace and not be owned by fear.

APPLICATION

DON’T BE FOOLED BY FALSE SHEPHERDS

To this day there are still thieves and predators that seek to prey on the sheep. Many of them are wolves in shepherds clothing. They come with messages of doubt and fear, with appeals for us to take care of ourselves by making sure we get what we think we need in this world, by trying to sell us lies that undermine the truth of the Great Shepherd.

We need to see them for what they are, recognize they are not seeking to care for us and bring us life, but to destroy us. Let’s not fall for their lies. We need to follow the Shepherd wherever he leads us, listen to his voice, whatever he says.

REST IN THE SHEPHERD

The great news is the Shepherd knows you. He knows you better than you know yourself. You matter to him, so much that he would live the 99 to find and rescue you. He knows all that is happening in your life. He wants you to talk to him about all of it and trust him with all of it. He wants you to be confident in his care for you so that you can let him take care of it.

This has been the year of the credit card for Laurie and me. We had some suspicious charges on our card that we have used for years, so they shut down that card and gave us a new one. Then, a couple of months later that one stopped working for some reason. Getting to the bottom of that has been a huge hassle. Meanwhile, we applied for a different, new credit card. We still aren’t sure what happened with that one except we were never able to access the card on line. It was a huge mess. We finally just said, “Forget it. Close that account.” But now we didn’t have a credit card. A few weeks later we decided we should try to get a card with that same company again, but I didn’t want to have to deal with it. Laurie said, “I’ll do it.” So Laurie plunged in and went through the whole process. It was a big relief for me to just say, “I’m going to let Laurie handle it.” She took care of it, and I didn’t stress about any of it. I let her deal with the stress. It was nice, peaceful.

That’s what we sheep can do. We don’t need to stress about where we are going to find the right pasture. We don’t have to worry about what wolves or lions are out there lurking in the shadows. We don’t have to work to find some nice placid place to drink some water. We can just leave it all in the shepherd’s hands, because he has promised to take care of us. So we can rest. We can be calm and at peace.

STAY CLOSE TO THE SHEPHERD

Philip Keller was a shepherd for many years. Drawing on his experience he wrote a book titled *A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23*. In it he said that at times cougars did damage to his flocks. They were always a threat. But the interesting part is he said in all of his years as a shepherd he never saw a cougar. They steered clear of the shepherd. They always pounced on sheep that were distant from the shepherd. Sheep who stayed near the shepherd were never in danger from them.

The best thing we can do is to stick close to the shepherd. Live always in his presence. Walk with him throughout our lives. As long as we are with the shepherd we will always be safe and secure.