

Article of the Month

May, 2020

***Sheepfolds***

In the 10th chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus offers both a parable and his explanation of it. It is a significant parable related to the fact that God's plan deals with different groups of people at different times. Sheep in this narrative represent those who are being dealt with and who are faithful at the time under consideration. We may all have noticed that different sheep are the subject of God's work at different times. For instance:

**In the Jewish Age:**

(From Jacob's Death to the End of Daniel 9's "70 Weeks") —

Jesus admonishes his disciples to go ONLY to "the lost sheep of the House of Israel." See Matthew 10:5, 6.

**In the Gospel Age:**

(From Pentecost to the Completion of the Church) —

Jesus admonishes Peter to "Feed my sheep." See John 21:17.

**In the Millennial Age:**

(From the Beginning of the Peaceable Kingdom until the End of the 1000 Years) —

Jesus' Parable of the Sheep & the Goats divides mankind into successful and unsuccessful groups. See Matthew 25:31-46.

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Understanding this age-related use of sheep and sheepfolds is necessary in order to comprehend Jesus' parable in John 10.

JOHN 10

**In Verse 1**, Jesus introduces some symbolic terminologies. He begins by speaking of ACCESS. In ANY age of man's experience, there will be persons (or even spirit beings) that attempt to deceive those who would be followers of the true God. There will also be those who attempt to profit from the benefits of the Lord's arrangements when they have not been invited to do so. Thus Jesus says that the ONLY ACCESS to God's people that will be tolerated by God is by the approved "DOOR."

THE FOLD is another symbol. This word does not represent the flock (the GROUP of sheep); it represents the protective arrangement — the authorized relationship to God. It is important to note that this "fold" (this fenced-in area) is not a prison! In verse 3 we see that the sheep can be led out of the enclosure — in the sense that their feeding and welfare are insured as long as their shepherd is the approved leader.

Unauthorized leadership is characterized by Jesus as being carried out by a leader who is "a thief and a robber." The words are powerful! A thief is someone who wants things for himself — even though he is not entitled to them. We might wonder why both "thief and robber" are used. It possibly indicates the crime from two standpoints. The "thief" characteristic shows unauthorized self-appropriation. The word "robber," on the other hand, suggests the effect on the true owner. We hear, "I've been robbed!" We don't hear, "I've been thieved!" Thievery benefits the thief. Robbery affects the victim. Jesus apparently wants us to know the two sides of the inappropriate action.

**In Verse 2**, Jesus points out that access to the Lord's people is permitted to those who get that access via the approved "door." Such people are considered to be "shepherds of the sheep."

**In Verse 3**, we have a continuation of the thought. Access is granted to those with the proper credentials. We will see that Jesus is teaching (among other things) that at the First Advent, there is NO ACCESS except by recognition of Jesus. Jesus will become BOTH the "door" AND a "shepherd" in this parable.

But in this verse Jesus introduces a new symbol, "the doorkeeper." It seems reasonable that this work of managing access via the door is the work of the holy spirit.

The parable message continues: The Lord's people (sheep), protected by the holy spirit, hear the voice (the truth-message) of the shepherd (the one sent to guide the flock).

This verse begins to give us the need to realize that Jesus is speaking from a First-Advent perspective. We will see in Jesus' explanation of the parable that there are MORE folds than just one. As the Jewish Age was ending, TWO folds were simultaneously in existence. Until the close of Daniel's "70-weeks" (which ended in A.D. 36), Israel was yet a legitimate sheep-fold. (See Daniel 9:24.) But when Pentecost came

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(A.D. 33), a NEW sheep-fold had opened — the sheep-fold of the SPIRITUAL Israel, the “Church” of Christ. At the First Advent, Jesus and his disciples were dealing with these TWO kinds of sheep. Thus, in one important sense, Jesus and his Apostles were leading “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” out of the fold represented by the Jewish Law Covenant and into the fold represented by the covenant of grace typified by Abraham’s wife, Sarah. (Galatians 4:22-31)

***In Verse 4***, we have emphasis on the ending of the Jewish-Age fold. The Great Shepherd (Jesus) led the faithful remnant of Jews out of the Law and into Grace — two very separate “folds.” The faithful remnant of Jews “knew his voice,” and they followed him out of the Law into the spirit-begotten arrangement of the Gospel Age.

***In Verse 5***, in addition to the general lesson, we see that the faithful remnant of Israel KNEW that the message coming from the Jewish religious leaders was a voice they knew not. The messages of the High Priest and the Pharisees were “the voice of strangers.”

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That was the parable. We have done some elaboration on it as we looked at it. But in verses 7-16, Jesus interprets the important points of the parable for our understanding.

Jesus begins by saying that HE is the “door” — verse 7. In other words, NO ACCESS to the Lord’s true people was then to be available except by faith in the identity of Jesus. Jesus points out (verse 8) that the Jewish hierarchy had long been “thieves and robbers” — profiting from their positions and denying the people the information needed for a true relationship with God. Jesus makes the point that all through the Jewish Age, the true followers of God “did not hear” the Jewish leaders. These true sheep would include the prophets who were always correcting the Jewish leaders, and the heroes of faith that Paul enumerates in Hebrews 11.

Jesus says (verse 9) that salvation into the new fold of the Gospel Age will give not only the protection of the fenced-in covenant, but the freedom to feed and to be watered wherever Jesus leads. (“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”)

Jesus shows the CONTRAST between thieves and himself (verse 10). The thief works for his own selfish interests — despite the havoc it causes to the sheep. Jesus came to give LIFE — not just being able to function, but to have it in the end, “more abundantly.” This is likely a hidden promise of the Divine Nature to be granted to the faithful sheep of the Gospel Age.

Jesus had (verse 7) identified himself as “the door” of the parable. Now he additionally identifies himself (verse 11) as the “good shepherd.” We might want to note the subtlety of the addition of the adjective “good” in front of “shepherd.” History has confirmed that there have been “evil shepherds” among the flock during the Christian Age. Even as Jesus spoke of his being “the true vine” (John 15), he later indicates (Revelation 14:18)

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that there would also be a “vine of the earth” — a false or counterfeit version of Christianity. This lesson of sheepfolds is a powerful lesson to us all of the protection by Jesus for his true saints in the midst of the wolves that would devour the flock.

In the 11th verse, Jesus points out HOW GOOD a shepherd he is! He gave the ransom sacrifice that would result in the salvation of all of God’s people in the end — the FINAL fold which will include restored mankind who had not previously been a part of any fold. (I Timothy 4:10 shows that God has a “special salvation” for those who have believed prior to the Kingdom, but that He also will save “all men” who will, during the Kingdom, become “believers” even though they had not previously been such. Rebels who refuse to comply during the Kingdom will THEN be eliminated. — See Acts 3:23.)

Verse 12 seems to be prophetic of the end of the Jewish-Age fold. The Jewish leaders had proved themselves to be “hirelings” — disinterested keepers of the Jewish flock. The “wolf” of this verse is not a part of the parable which Jesus gave. It seems likely, then, to be a little prophetic “addition” by Jesus in order to show what was about to happen. The “wolf” here is likely the Roman Empire which came in A.D. 70 to destroy the nation of Israel and to begin what is known as its “diaspora.” (See Daniel 9:26 from which Jesus conceivably learned this information.) The Pharisees were, in Jesus’ day, constantly trying to appease Roman wrath — even at the expense of the people.

Jesus repeats the lesson of the parable in verses 14 and 15. But then he adds a lesson about the FUTURE from his First Advent. Verse 16 is a masterpiece of economic statement about Jesus’ future work. (Compare I Corinthians 15:24, 28.)

Jesus begins verse 16 by stating that he has “other sheep, which are not of this fold.” At his First Advent, he was dealing with the termination of the Jewish fold and with bringing its faithful sheep safely into a new Gospel-Age fold. Jesus knew that Gentiles would become sheep in the new Gospel-Age fold. Thus he was referring to the fact that, once the Jewish fold was terminated (A.D. 36), he would be dealing with people who were NOT YET sheep — people like Cornelius — who would become a part of the new fold which was replacing the fold of the Law Covenant. But, even BEYOND that, Jesus knew that his Millennial Kingdom would be yet ANOTHER fold (as shown in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats of Matthew 25).

What a far-seeing and complete vision Jesus had! Beyond rescuing the faithful remnant of “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus was contemplating his wonderful works toward the faithful sheep of the Gospel-Age Christian fold, and his wonderful “restitution” work (Acts 3:21) for the Millennial-Age fold for the billions of mankind not yet saved — not yet brought into the eternal fold of a perfect relationship with God. And THAT fold (I Corinthians 15:24, 28) he will turn over to his Father in perfection. In Jesus’ own words, ALL will then be “one flock with one shepherd.”

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