

Diggings

...from the desk of Jim Fleming

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THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Due to technical problems with the transcription of my lectures, I have asked Derrick Lewis if he would kindly submit this month's edition of *Diggings*. We will work on resolving our transcription issues for the subsequent *Diggings* in this series. I thank Derrick for coming to the rescue.

The year 2010 is "The Year of the Shepherd" at the Explorations in Antiquity Center. This series of *Diggings* will illustrate the topic of The Good Shepherd. The next four *Diggings* will explore the practices of shepherding, as well as Jesus' teachings about *The Good Shepherd*. We shall better understand how he acted as a Good Shepherd with those around him.

In John 10:1-16, Jesus used the setting of the sheepfold and shepherding to teach that God relates to people in many ways like a shepherd to sheep. The idea of God as Shepherd is not new with the teachings of Jesus. It has roots

deep in the Hebrew mind. When Jacob blessed Joseph, he said, "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day...". Psalm 80 refers to God as, "Shepherd of Israel," and Isaiah 40 says of God, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart..."

Of course, the most famous declaration of God as Shepherd is Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd." In this Psalm, David described the many ways that God led, protected and cared for him. This Psalm is explained in more detail in Volume 1 of *Diggings* (7 issues) in which this text is developed in-depth.

Jesus began his discussion of the Good Shepherd this way: "*I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber.*"



A wolf, one of the predators that endangered sheep

Predators were common in the deserted places in southern Israel. Wolves, foxes, leopards, lions, hyena, caracals and other animals were a danger to sheep, goats, and even shepherds. Jesus however, was not speaking of carnivorous predators in this passage, but rather bad shepherds (these will be discussed in a later *Diggings*).

Israel had experiences with bad shepherds (for example, see Ezekiel 34). A bad shepherd did not care about the welfare of the flock and in that sense was as dangerous to the sheep as a lion or a wolf. Jesus pointed out that many bad shepherds came before him, but that his sheep were not fooled (John 10:7).

How does one know he is following the true shepherd? Jesus said: *“The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”*

There are several very important lessons from these verses. **1. The shepherd knows his sheep.** In general, sheep all look similar, though some may have distinguishing features. However, shepherds wanted to be careful not to have their sheep disputed with the flocks of other shepherds should they graze too close together. It was common for the shepherd to mark his sheep in a specific way so that they could be easily identified. The shepherd used various colors of vegetable dye or stain to mark his sheep.

The shepherd also knew his sheep individually. They were not just a flock to him. They were a group of individual sheep, each with different personalities, strengths and weaknesses. Some were weaker than others; some older; some more prone to lose their way. He knew each sheep’s makeup and remembered it as he led them.

Jesus reminded his disciples that God also knew them individually. He taught that the good shepherd knew where his sheep should be kept for safety at night and that he would remain with them. That the shepherd “calls them by name,” reflects intimate knowledge of each one. We are more than just a member of God’s flock, we are known by Him (John 10:14).



A flock of sheep marked by the shepherd with vegetable dye. This will assure that ownership of these sheep will not be contested if they get too close to another grazing flock.

2. The sheep know their shepherd. *“The sheep listen to his voice,”* (John 10:4). Did you know that by the time a lamb is 15 days old, it already recognizes the voice of the shepherd? It is so important for the sheep to know the shepherd’s voice because it is that voice which will lead them, warn them, and even comfort them. To hear the voice of the shepherd is to feel safe and secure. Sheep are so accustomed and attuned to the voice of their shepherd that the voice of another shepherd might even cause them fear.

Learning to discern the voice of God from other competing voices clamoring for our attention, is a key part of spiritual maturity. In John 10:14 Jesus said, *“...and my sheep know me.”* He even compared the intimate knowledge between him and his followers with the relationship between father and son.

3. The shepherd leads the sheep by going ahead of them. Goats are often driven, like cattle are ahead of the cattleman. Shepherds, however, lead their sheep by going ahead of them. The wilderness areas traversed by sheep was often narrow, steep, rocky and dangerous. Shepherds went ahead of their sheep to lead them the safest way possible. Because they tend to follow each other very closely, it is easy for them not be able to view very far ahead, and wander off a cliff. The shepherd carefully selected the safest, easiest route for his flock to follow.

In many ways it is safe to say that Jesus went ahead of his disciples. He helped them through dangerous paths and showed them the safest way. As this *Diggings* is being written, it is nearly Easter. There may be no better example of God “going ahead of us,” than in the *Resurrection Narratives*. Christ faced the most dangerous of paths, death, and conquered it by appearing to his disciples on the other side. He was willing to enter a place of human hatred and depravity, yet he did not return hatred for hatred. He has given us hope that can sustain us through the darkest of times.

This passage gives us an example of how the shepherd cared for his sheep. *“He will come and go out, and find pasture. I have come that they*

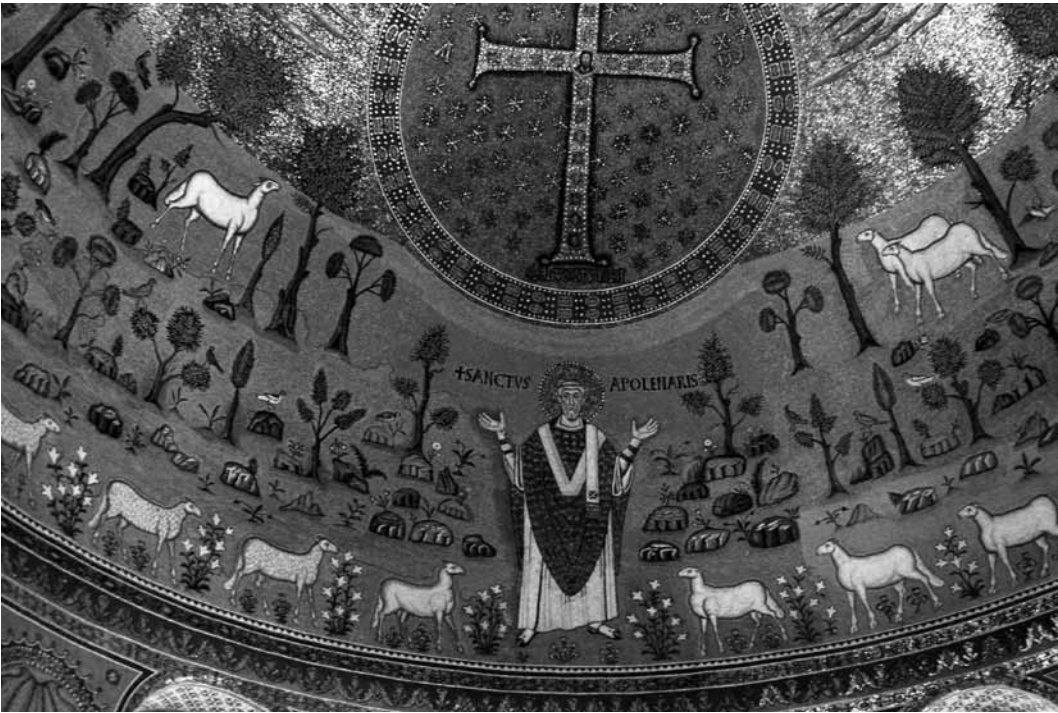


Rocky, narrow path along the top of a cliff where shepherds lead their flocks.

may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:9-10). The sheep were not left alone, to fend for themselves. The shepherd kept a watchful eye on them. And when they were outside of the fold, he made sure they were guarded.

Sheep had constant need of food, water, shelter and safety. *“So do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear? ...your heavenly Father knows that you need them.”* The Good Shepherd understands our needs, and provides accordingly.

There is one more very important lesson in this teaching by Jesus: **4. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.** *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep”* (John 10:11-13).



A depiction of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. This mosaic is located in a church in Ravenna, Italy and dates back to the 5th century CE.

The owner of sheep may have a hired hand to help with the shepherding responsibilities. But he is well-aware that when push comes to shove, the hired hand may walk away. The true shepherd will not stop guarding his flock, even during danger to his own life. The main reason that a shepherd will risk his very life to protect the sheep is because he has become attached to them due to the fact he has raised, carried, protected, healed, and lived alongside his sheep. He has invested his life in them and cares dearly for them.

The example shows how Jesus helped his disciples realize that God helped carry the weak among us. God also wrapped the wounds of the brokenhearted, brought justice to the oppressed, healed the infirm and strengthened the aged.

The early followers of Jesus believed that the heart of God could be seen in Christ, who was the Good Shepherd who put our lives before his own.

In upcoming editions of *Diggings* we will continue to explore the historical, geographical, and cultural settings contained in the Biblical teachings about shepherding and the Good Shepherd.

Further reading possibilities by Dr. James Fleming (Available at Biblical Resources Bookstore):

- 1) The Gospel of John: The meanings of John's "I Am" sayings. 136 pages.
\$20.00 + \$5.00 S&H.
- 2) Jesus' Last Night with His Disciples by Jim Fleming and Hannaniah Pinto. 239 pages.
\$49.00 + \$7.00 S&H.