Shepherds or Sheep?

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For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. **12** As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. **13** I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. **14** I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. **15** I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. **16** I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ezekiel 34:11-16)

1. The Relationship between the Shepherd and Sheep

One of the happiest moments in Israel for me was when we met with a group of sheep. Sheep and a shepherd were strolling the hills in the countryside. The relationship between sheep and a shepherd is very interesting. The sheep, in many ways, depend on the shepherd as part of their lives.

The Bible tells us that the relationship that God has with humanity is like a shepherd and his sheep. The relationship is similar to newborn children and their parents. As babies can't survive without parents, the sheep can't live without the shepherd. The shepherd for sheep is the provider, the protector, the guide, and the savior in times of need.

2. God Is Upset

Ezekiel 34 shows us a disappointed and upset God. Why is God upset? It is because the leaders of Israel are not caring for the people of Israel. Israel was scattered and wandered as a nation. They are hungry, thirsty, and tired. God says to the leaders through the prophet Ezekiel. "***You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.*** **4** ***You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.*** **5** ***So they were scattered, because***

there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals" (Ezekiel 34:3-5). God was so disappointed by the political and religious leaders in Israel.

They were supposed to lead the people, but instead neglected the sheep. The scattering that Ezekiel refers to likely was the capture of the Israelites by the Assyrians and Babylonians, scattering the people among the surrounding nations. God tells the leaders that they will be judged for their selfishness and for neglecting the people that God put them to lead in Ezekiel 34:7-10.

3. God Sent Us the Good Shepherd

In verses 11 and the following, God promises that he will intervene in the situation of Israel. God says, "***As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.*** ***13*** ***I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel***" (verses 12 & 13). God tells them that he will restore Israel and like sheep, bring the people to good grazing grounds. God would rescue and lead the people like a good shepherd.

In Ezekiel 34:23, God says "***I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd***.***"*** David, the king, had long died before this word was spoken. So the passage tells us that this refers to the covenant that God made with David. God promised that David's descendants would always sit on the throne of Israel. Simon Peter makes it clear in his sermon in Acts chapter 2 that Jesus now sits on the throne of his father David and that Jesus will come at last to rule and reign over the whole earth (verse 30).

The Gospel of John chapter 10 tells us that Jesus was sent into the world as the good shepherd. John 10:11 & 15 say, "***I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep… I lay down my life for the sheep***." The passage reminds us again of the image of the shepherd. Jesus would die for his sheep. The death of Jesus would give us forgiveness and restoration with God. Jesus came as the good shepherd and we are his sheep.

4. Jesus Looks for the Good Shepherds

In the passage today, the prophet Ezekiel tells us that God is the true shepherd. God would use David as the shepherd of Israel. In the gospel of John, John tells us that Jesus is the good shepherd and we are the sheep of

the Lord. But when we read John 21, we see that Jesus looks for the shepherds. He does not want us to remain sheep but wants us to become one of the good shepherds.

The different gospel accounts give us different details about what happens when Jesus rises from the dead. In John's gospel, Jesus visits Simon Peter and the six disciples fishing by the Sea of Tiberias. From the shore, Jesus calls out to the disciples, "did you catch anything?" The disciples reply "no." Jesus shouts again, "***Cast your net on the right side of the boat***" (John 21:6). John says, "***When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish***" (verse 6). John tells us that Peter knew right away that the person on the shore was Jesus and Peter jumps into the water to swim to Jesus as fast as he can.

On the shore Jesus and his disciples have breakfast. After the meal, Jesus turns to Peter and asks, "***Simon son of John, do you love me more than these***?" What does Jesus mean by "these"? Some suggest that Jesus is referring to Peter's friends or his life as fisherman. We don't know what Jesus means by these. Whatever that means, the important thing is what Jesus says to Simon Peter after Peter responds. Peter says, "***Yes, Lord; you know that I love you***." Jesus says to Peter, "***feed my lambs***." Jesus asks again to Peter, "***Simon son of John do you truly love me***?" Peter answers "***Yes, Lord, you know that I love you***." Jesus says, "***take care of my sheep***." The third time Jesus asks Peter, "***Simon son of John do you love me***?" Peter says, "***Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you***." Jesus says "***feed my sheep***."

Many people cite this passage as important because it is an image of Jesus' forgiveness and restoration of Peter after denying Jesus three times. But what I think gets overlooked is what Jesus tells Peter to do. Jesus tells Peter to become a shepherd and take care of Jesus' sheep. Peter was a disciple and a sheep of Jesus. Now Jesus calls Peter and us to become loving and caring shepherds just like Christ.

5. Who are Disciples?

The United Methodists say that our mission is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Who are disciples of Jesus Christ? Are those who profess faith in Jesus and those who take vows of church membership disciples? Are we all disciples of Jesus Christ? Would Jesus say that we are his disciples? Dr. David Watson, a professor of Methodist History, says that "discipleship requires more than a change of heart. It requires us not only to know Jesus Christ, but to walk with him. It requires us not only to hear his words, but to act on them." For him those who share the love of our Lord with others are disciples of Jesus Christ.

6. Conclusion

Jesus came into the world to give us the never-ending love of God through his death and resurrection. And in the same way, Jesus calls each of us to love one another like Him. When we love one another, we are his disciples, and shepherds to his sheep. In John 13:34-35, Jesus says to his disciples, "***I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. [35] By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.***" In John 21:15-17, Jesus says to Simon Peter, "If you love me, love my people. They are my sheep. As I am the good shepherd, you must be the good shepherds."

7. Application

For me John 21:15-17 is one of the most important passages in the Bible because this passage made me go to seminary and become a pastor. Sometimes I blame the John's gospel on my calling into ministry because I did not want to be a pastor. I wanted to a faithful lay person. However, Jesus asked me the question he had asked to Simon Peter. "Do you love me?" Jesus asked me not three times, but probably 300 times. Although I did not like Jesus asked me the question, I could not say that I hated him. When I said, "Lord, you know that I loved you." Jesus said "be one of the good shepherds." At that time, I was not excited about going to seminary. But I am thankful that God has given me the opportunity to serve you as your pastor.

I do not think that you have to go to seminary to be a shepherd. If someone experiences the love of God through you and me, we are the shepherd to them. We do not have to lay down our life for them. We would let them know that Jesus already died for them.

To whom are we the shepherds? Our sheep would be our family, our church folks, our neighbors, or anyone who needs the love of Jesus. As long as our life gives them a meaning of life, purpose, encouragement, help, and the love of Jesus, we are the shepherds to them.

Jesus asks us this morning. "Do you love me?" If we say yes, Jesus would say "be one of the good shepherds." There are so many Christians who go to church and enjoy worship and fellowship. Of course, as God's sheep, we need those. But the Bible tells us that we should be concerned about others. Our Lord wants us to be one of the good shepherds who take care of his sheep. I would like to encourage you to have a specific plan how to share the love of Jesus with others. I pray that people around us can experience the amazing love of our Lord Jesus Christ through you and me. Amen.