**“FEELING SHEEPISH?”**

T

he farmer’s wife nagged him to no end. To avoid her, he’d go shear his sheep. One day during one of her tirades a ram kicked her in the head, and she died on the spot.

After the funeral the minister asked him why when a lady would console him, he’d nod “yes,” but when men spoke to him, he’d shake his head “no.” The farmer said, "The women said how nice my wife looked, but the men wanted to know if I’d sell that ram.

Being easily frightened, sheep graze side-by-side for self-protection. Two thousand years ago Middle Eastern shepherds led their flocks into a central sheepfold overnight. Perhaps half a dozen different flocks would mingle together behind a locked gate, manned by a gatekeeper. At daybreak each shepherd would rouse his flock and escort them out to pasture for the day.

Let’s read John 10:1-21 (p. 798, NIV).

DISCUSS: Why did Jesus choose sheepherding to reveal His identity? What can we learn from Jesus’ style of communicating expansive concepts?

DISCUSS: If Jesus is the Good Shepherd and all people are sheep, and if this story is so foundational for understanding life’s big picture, why are we sheep who “know His voice” so reluctant to tell others about Him?

DISCUSS: What do we learn here about Christ’s resurrection?

DISCUSS: If rational people who actually saw and heard Christ teach and do supernatural things like heal blindness, paralysis and leprosy, even raise the dead, and STILL refuse to trust Him, describe the challenge to get people to believe today, 2,000 years later, with no Jesus around?

Jesus Christ says He’s the Good Shepherd, not one of the “false shepherds,” e.g., the Pharisees. These self-righteous, spiritual leaders were obsessed with strutting their A+ grades for complying flawlessly with religious rituals, feast days, dietary laws and the like.

These learned scholars were familiar with the 300 or so detailed predictions made about their Messiah centuries earlier. Yet they rejected Jesus’ claim to be God, despite watching Him perform miracles (even on the Sabbath, God forbid!), speak with the authority of Yahweh, forgive people’s sins, and meet ALL of the prophecies’ and the Law’s demands. To them, this was blasphemy.

**Shear Terror or Shear Ecstasy?**

1. Jesus fulfilled every iota of Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah (Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2).
2. The Watchman/Gatekeeper was John the Baptist who introduced the Lamb of God (John 1:19-24).
3. Jesus calls each sheep by name. His Holy Spirit lives in His followers in an intimate, ongoing, one-to-one encounter.
4. Jesus leads His sheep out of darkness into light, from danger to safety, from hunger into fullness, out of impending destruction into eternal life (Psalm 23).
5. Jesus’ sheep recognize His voice but run from strangers.

With many impostors claiming to be the real Messiah, our Lord stresses twice that He’s telling it straight, calling Himself “the Way, the Life and the Truth” (John 14:6). When we fall for untruth, we become its slaves. Knowing Truth (i.e., Christ) frees us to live in reality, and in good standing with the God of the universe.

After letting his flock graze in the Judean hills all morning, the shepherd would fashion a makeshift shelter out of brush where his sheep could take a midday siesta. Then he’d lie down across the opening of this temporary refuge, keeping predators out and his prone-to-wander sheep in. The Holy Spirit helps keeps believers from straying from Truth’s safety or being attacked by enemies who are out to “kill, steal or destroy” those who know and follow Christ.

Entrapped by this world’s distractions is one way to have our peace and sense of security stolen, destroyed or killed. Or we can remain where we hear our Lord’s voice, content in the security and liberty He gives. Our adventure with Christ is “the abundant life” He promises us when we’re in the True Shepherd’s care (John 10:10).

Why liken people to sheep (Psalm 95:7)? Seeking strength in numbers, they instinctively “flock” together to ward off predators. If a sheep bolts, without hesitation the rest follow, even over a cliff! If isolated, sheep get agitated. Sudden, loud noises stress them out, so the shepherd uses his gentle voice. Lying on its back with hooves pointing skyward, a “cast” sheep is helpless. B-a-a-a-ad news! His peeps can’t help him. Only the shepherd can right his wrong.

What would drive a man to risk his life for some of the dumbest animals in God’s creation? It wasn’t a lucrative contract, or endorsement checks for wearing logos on his turban, or season tickets to the camel races. It was love. The Good Shepherd loves His sheep so totally that He gave His life for us. Only the perfect, unselfish love of God would cause Him to forsake heaven’s lavish comforts to be born in a barn, falsely accused, stripped, beaten and hung on a cross, taking spear thrusts in His ribs, crucified like a common criminal. How could we *not* respond to that Love?

**“The Hills Are Alive …****”**

Back in Jesus’ day shepherds, once respected as ranchers, were now low class, smelly, poor and undesirable to hang with. So, why were these ordinary laborers selected by God to receive the all-time birth announcement from singing angels no less?? **Let’s discover God’s Christmas gift to the world in Luke 2:1-20 (p. 762, NIV).**

In that day every Jewish person knew from school, Sabbaths in the temple, and dinner talk how to recognize the Messiah. Yet few noted His birth. You’d think banner headlines in the *Jerusalem Post* would scream: “God Born In Barn!” or “Hay, Messiah’s Here!” or “Innkeeper Fired. Says ‘No Room for God.’”

Grocery store tabloids could’ve blared: “Teen Virgin Delivers God-boy!” or “Nazareth Carpenter Turns Entrepreneur, Selling Miniature Nativity Scenes.”

We can understand God, as the proud Father, announcing His Son’s birth to “wise men” who, if invited to a baby shower, would bring gifts of gold! But why the fanfare to tell ordinary, smelly shepherds -- social outcasts barred from the cities since many were thieves?

1. Sheep raised by Bethlehem shepherds were sold to repentant Jews to take to the temple as sacrifices for their sins. Even in Jesus’ birth we see a foretaste of His death.
2. Since faith giants Abraham, Moses and David were shepherds to whom God had promised the Messiah, to honor them He chose to showcase shepherds (Psalm 23:1-6; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:11-16; Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:1-7).
3. As occupants of society’s bottom rungs, God’s admiration for these humble field hands demonstrates that no one is too far down for Him to love and forgive.

DISCUSS: How can we, His sheep, learn to hear His voice?

DISCUSS: What’s clear from the timing of the census? How does that apply to your life?

DISCUSS: When the angels left, what did the shepherds model for us (Psalm 100:1-5)?

**God Is Counting Sheep. Are You In?**

Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb of God, paid for ALL of your sins (Isaiah 53:6). He wants to put you right with His Father and live with you always, here on earth and in your life-to-come after death.

Nameless farm workers heard about the Savior in a spectacular way, then went to see for themselves. How about you? Is your name written in the Lamb’s Book of Life? If you doubt that He is who He says He is, here’s your challenge: ask Him to reveal Himself to you.

His Deal

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*Focus on forever.*

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