

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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I Am the Good Shepherd

Here in chapter 10, we come to the last scene of this Act. The players are Jesus and his audience, consisting of local Jews, Jewish pilgrims, and the Jewish hierarchy of Jerusalem (verses 6-7). The setting for this discourse appears (10:1-21) appears to have occurred while Jesus was still in Jerusalem following the conclusion of the Feast of Tabernacles. The man Jesus had given sight had been excommunicated from the synagogue by the Jewish hierarchy who were supposed to be the shepherds of Israel. This was a common way of referring to the leaders of Israel throughout the OT Scriptures. The action is that of a presentation of a discourse, which constitutes the script of this scene, and the consequent reaction. The themes developing out of this discourse are numerous: there is the shepherd theme, the characteristics or behavior of a flock of sheep, Jesus identification with the shepherd imagery, the dangers threatening the sheep, Jesus' claims that his sheep are those who hear his voice, those who refuse to hear him are not his nor are they of God, the shepherd gives his life for the sheep (a sacrificial savior of the sheep), his claims of authority over his own life and death, and the division of the audience over Jesus' claims (i.e., the belief/disbelief theme).

The Shepherd Imagery

There is a collection of material in the Scriptures called "shepherd teachings" (cf. **in the OT**, Psalms 23, 80:1; 100:3; Isa 40:10-11; 56:9-12; Jer 23:1-4; 50:6; Ezek 34:1-12; 34:22-23; 37:23; Zech 10:3; 13:7; **in the NT**, Matt 2:6; 26:31; Luke 2:8; 15:3-7; 17:7; John 10; 21:16; Acts 20:28; Eph 4:11; Heb 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:1-4; Rev 7:17; 12:5; 19:15).

The shepherd of Palestine was a very unique figure. A good description of him and his activities are found in McClintock and Strong:

The terms in Hebrew are *roeh* (a feeder), *boker* (a herdsman), and *mocked* (a sheep master). In the Greek OT and NT, it is *poimen* - a shepherd. The frequent and beautiful allusions to the shepherd's office in the poetical portions of the Bible rather bespeak a period when the shepherd had become an ideal character . . . The routine of the shepherd's duties appears to have been as follows: in the morning he led forth his flock from the fold, which he did by going before them and calling to them, as is still usual in the East; arriving at the pasturage, he watched the flock with assistance of dogs, and should any sheep stray, he had to search for it until he found it; he supplied them with water, either at a running stream or at troughs attached to wells; at evening he brought them back to the fold, and reckoned them to see that none were missing, by passing them "under the rod" as they entered the door of the enclosure, checking each sheep as it passed by a motion of the hand; and finally, he watched the entrance of the fold throughout the night, acting as porter. We need not assume that the same person was on duty both by night and by day; Jacob, indeed, asserts this of himself, but it would be more probable that the shepherds took it by turn, or that they kept watch for a portion only of the night, as may possibly be implied in the expression in Luke 2:8, "keeping watch." The shepherd's office thus required great watchfulness, particularly by night. It also required tenderness towards the young and feeble, particularly in driving them to and from the pasturage. (*Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 9:2763-64.)

Scene Fourteen (10:1-18): Discourse On the Good Shepherd

I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ²The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. ³The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. ⁷Therefore Jesus

said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it in abundance. ¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The 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. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me - ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father - and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life - only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.

The OT shepherd was a very prominent character to the Jews, in that many of the patriarchs and major figures in the heritage of Israel were shepherds: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, etc. God was called Israel's shepherd and Israel viewed itself as God's flock (cf. Psalms 23, 80, and 100). It is in the context of these ideas that these words of Jesus are to be understood.

Jesus appears to be saying that those who were professing themselves to be shepherds of Israel (the Jewish hierarchy) were not shepherds at all; rather, they were thieves and robbers; and those who believed themselves to be God's flock may be self-deceived (10:1-6). The true sheep recognize the voice of the true shepherd. Jesus' voice was the voice of God (the true shepherd of Israel), and the true flock of God was those who heard their master's voice and followed it.

The theme of belief vs disbelief is the key to opening up these verses. Those who believe in Jesus - who hear his voice and follow him (verse 4) - are the true flock of God. Those who disbelieve are those who are rejecting the voice of God for the voice of a stranger (verse 5), and are following false shepherds in following the Jewish hierarchy in their opposition to Jesus'

Christological claims.

According to verse 6, the people didn't understand what Jesus was saying with this allegory, so, in the following verses (verses 7-18) he tells them in no uncertain terms who the players of his allegory are. In verse 7 he declares, "I am the gate of the flock." The gate (Greek *thura* - means of entrance or access) to the true flock of God is Jesus, or better, belief in him (verses 6-9). The thieves and robbers are those who steal the sheep, and kill and destroy them. Those killing and destroying were the Jews hierarchy, and this audience, no doubt, knew this. Recall what these Jews had just done to the man born blind in John 9. God's Messiah, however, came to give life, and to give it in abundance (verse 10).

This expression of verse 10, literally translated from the Greek text, reads, "I have come in order that life you may have, and abundantly you may have it." Two words are of special interest: (1) life, and (2) abundantly. There are three different words for life in the Greek language. There is *bios*, which means life as a period of time, the duration of our earthly sojourn. We speak of a person's **biography** meaning the story of his life. Then there is the word *psyche*, meaning life as an existence, one's conscious existence. This word is often translated as "soul," and in Modern Greek means "mind" as used in the term **psychology**. The third term, which is the word used by Jesus here in verse 10, is *zoe*, which is a more generic term for life. It means life in the fullest sense of the word - a concept of life which encompasses all other concepts of life. It is not simply life as a span of time or life as conscious existence, but a time-span and an existence filled with meaning, significance, and worth. *Zoe* is life at its best, and is the Greek term used in the NT expression "eternal life" (*zoe aionios*), life that goes on into eternity. The term "abundantly" simply embellishes this idea of *zoe*. The Greek word here is an adverb lexically defined as, "over and above, exceedingly, to have in abundance, beyond measure, running over the cup." The life this shepherd gives is life in the fullest sense of the word that is so full it is running over the cup.

This shepherd gives this "life in abundance" by laying down his life for the sheep (v 11). What a curious statement. What could he possibly mean by such a statement? The answer lies in verses 12-18, which is, perhaps, the most intriguing part of this discourse.

In keeping with the analogy of the Palestinian shepherd, the sheep are

in constant danger of death from violent and evil beings - wolves, etc. A good shepherd will lay down his own life to rescue the sheep from such beings. This is precisely what God did. He, by means of incarnation, entered into human existence and experienced human death in order to destroy the power of death (Rev 1:17-18) and the one who had enslaved humankind by the power of death (Heb 2:14-15). This God did by experiencing sonship (Phil 2:5-11) in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:1, 14), and through the experience of sonship (human existence) he experienced human death and resurrection from death (i.e., the conquest of death). Through the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth death was overcome and Satan's ultimate power over humankind was rendered powerless. Satan was, in essence, conquered, and all humankind rendered free from the power of death through belief in the Messiahship of Christ and his resurrection from death (Rom 10:9-10).

It is important to note here that Jesus speaks of his death, not in terms of a victim sacrifice (i.e., an animal/person someone offers in behalf of someone else); rather, he speaks of his death in terms of martyrdom, he offered himself as a sacrifice, the sacrifice of a martyr - a self-sacrificial act. This interpretation of his death is clearly in conflict with the doctrine of the vicarious suffering and death of Christ, wherein Jesus is portrayed as victim sacrificed in the stead of (or substituted for) someone else in order to appease the wrath of an angry God by giving him blood that, supposedly, satisfied his justice. This is a doctrine owing its origins and development more to theologians of later centuries (e.g. Augustine, Anselm, and Calvin) than to the NT.

From Jesus' words here in these verses, he could not have seen his death in terms of the animal sacrifices of the Temple ritual, wherein he was substituted for the animal - resulting in a human sacrifice (which is what the sacrifice of a human victim would be). In his own words, he said, "I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power/authority to lay it down, and I have the power/authority to take it again" (verses 17-18). He laid down his life in order that he may take it again. He died in order to destroy death by means of his resurrection; and in this he affected salvation for the whole of humankind by destroying the power of death for all those who believe in him and his resurrection.

***Scene Fifteen (10:19-21): Reaction to His Speech:
Belief Verses Disbelief, Again***

At these words the Jews were again divided. ²⁰Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" ²¹But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

The division that erupts because of his words is, again the Jewish hierarchy. The same accusation is hurled at him: "He has a demon, he is insane" (verse 20). Disbelief! But others were not so ready to disbelieve. "These are not the sayings of one who has a demon," some reasoned, and further, "Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" (verse 21).

Again some disbelieve, while others believe. Why? Over and over again, this same theme appears. All of the action, discourses, and dialogues of this Gospel seem lead the reader to the same theme – belief vs disbelief. Why? Because belief is redemptive to John; but, belief in what? Belief in what God has revealed. But what has he revealed? He has revealed himself in the person of the one called “the Son” – the offspring of God. Jesus is the revelation of God. But not only is he the revelation of God, he is the redemption of God. The only hope of redemption is belief in this revelation. Those who believe are those who are willing to see that revelation. Something is there in this person Jesus of Nazareth that captivates some. They see something that others do not see - a revelation of God.

In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God was here. Those who let themselves see what was there to see believed this, and that belief saved them from the power of sin, and the power of death. Those who would not let themselves believe would never escape the power of sin or the power of death. The power of sin would destroy them, and the power of death would forever enslave them. How full of both wonder and horror are his words, "Except you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins."

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