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Who Is Jesus?

The Good Shepherd

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Out of Jesus' seven 'I Am' statements in the Gospel of John, His fourth – "I Am the Good Shepherd – is, in my estimation, the most precious and tender.

"I Am the Good Shepherd" is the one that ties together the other six. It stands out as the most significant for our salvation because it is in this statement that Jesus explains His death on our behalf. This passage in John 10 is, as Dr. Steven Lawson has noted, Jesus' own commentary on His death and resurrection.

Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly identifies the heir to David's throne – the promised Messiah, Yahweh in human flesh – as the shepherd of God's people. It is no surprise when Jesus came, He declared His messianic credentials by asserting that He is the good shepherd. Jesus is the one promised by the Father in the Old Testament, who would come to bring salvation to God's people.

What makes Jesus the good shepherd is not simply that He is compassionate, although He is. What makes Jesus the good shepherd in this context is that He gives His life for His sheep.

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Through this statement, Jesus does not mean that He gives His life for His sheep merely as an example for them, or that His death was exclusively an act of love. Certainly Jesus' death for us is an example, and it absolutely does demonstrate the love of Christ for His people, but for a very particular reason.

Jesus' death is significant because it provided atonement for our sins. His sheep were in mortal danger – on the verge of death because of their sin against a holy God. Jesus, the good shepherd, comes and lays down His life to spare the lives of His sheep. He takes responsibility for our sin on the cross and gives His life to pay the penalty our sins deserved. Instead of our deaths, He dies; and through His sacrificial death, we are spared and receive eternal life.

These truths are the heart of the gospel: the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ for the sins of His people, that He truly bore our sins in His body on the cross. Our sins had to be paid for and our guilt punished; but instead of God punishing us, He punished Jesus, who died for us and laid down His life for His sheep.

The heart of this 'I Am' statement is this: 'Why did Jesus lay down His life for His sheep?' The answer to this question is what Jesus desires us to see where He calls Himself the 'good shepherd.' Jesus wants us to know what moved Him to die on our behalf, to give His life for our sins, and to bear the wrath of God in our place. So, Jesus gives us three motivations that motivated Him as our good shepherd to give up His life for our sake.

First, Jesus laid down His life for His sheep because He loves His sheep.

To help us better comprehend the love of Christ for us as His sheep, Jesus creates a contrast between Himself and a new character in the development of this image: the 'hired hand.' I think Jesus once again is contrasting Himself with the religious leaders of Israel. They were thieves and robbers in the previous context because their goal was to prevent people from finding life through Christ. In this passage, they are now hirelings because they use the sheep for their own enrichment without any genuine love for God's people.

Jesus, then, stands in contrast to the hired hands because He, unlike the religious leaders, is concerned for the sheep. Jesus loves His sheep, and this explains why He gives His life for them. Jesus will never flee to save Himself at our expense (like the hireling) because Jesus truly is concerned for the wellbeing of His sheep.

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Second, Jesus gave His life for His sheep because He knows His sheep.

At first glance, this seems to be a good reason for Jesus not to die for His sheep! Think about what sinners we are – with all our flaws, failures, and weaknesses. Charles Spurgeon once said, *“If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him. For you are worse than he thinks you to be.”* It is nothing less than astounding to think that one of the reasons the Savior died for His sheep is because He knows His sheep intimately.

Jesus knows us. He knows our names, and He knows us better than we know ourselves. With this understanding, He still died for us, knowing all our sinfulness, failures, weaknesses, and the ways we would deny Him.

Here’s something even more incredible: not only does Jesus know us, but we get to know Him. We know our good shepherd, which means that we are in a close, intimate, and personal relationship with Christ. To know Jesus is the heart of the Christian life. This was all that mattered to Paul, whose life was dominated by the desire to know Christ more. To know our good shepherd is the heartbeat of every believer.

All believers in Jesus Christ have the same shepherd and are part of the same flock. That unity should express itself in how we love and treat one another in the local body of Christ. If there is one thing the world should see from Christian congregations, it is that we love one another and are unified under the good shepherd. There are times when we will certainly disagree with one another about various issues, but we should always desire to glorify our good shepherd who laid His life for us. In fact, we should be so overwhelmed by the grace Christ has shown us in laying down His life for us while knowing everything about us, that we quickly act to forgive, to show mercy, to love, and to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the church.

Finally, the good shepherd lays down His life for His sheep because He obeys His Father.

Jesus died for us because He is perfectly obedient to the Father’s command. He has authority to lay down His life, and He has authority to take it up again. Jesus had this authority because the Father commanded Him to offer Himself up for our sins and rise from the dead. Understand, too, Jesus is not saying He went begrudgingly or His will was different than the Father’s. Jesus is simply stating a fact that He, the Son, has the authority to do the Father’s will.

As such, the Father loves the Son because the Son is infinitely lovable. Everything about Christ and who He is elicits the Father’s love. When the Father looks at the Son and sees who He is as the perfect image of the invisible God, as the exact representation of His

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nature, as His beloved Son – the Father rejoices in, delights in, and loves His Son because the Father sees that the Son is lovely.

The Father's love of His Son is the exact opposite of us as sinners: the Father does not love us because we are lovely. We are worthy of nothing but divine contempt for all eternity because of our sin. Jesus, though, is worthy of nothing but divine love for all eternity because He is infinitely lovable. His loveliness and perfection expresses itself in His submission to the will of the Father. The Father does not love us because we are lovely. The Father loves us because of Christ. Because we are one with Christ, the Father will make us lovely by conforming us to the image of His beloved Son.

If the Father loves Christ because He is infinitely worthy of love, we should love Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The Good Shepherd is infinitely worthy, beautiful, and lovely. Let us always make Jesus, the good shepherd, the chief object of our souls' affections.



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