

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

Jesus came so that we could have life to the full. Let's explore the first portion of John 10, the Good Shepherd chapter, so we can better appreciate the life that Jesus gives us.

Jesus says: *¹I 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.* It's too bad that sheep are so delicious—too bad for the sheep anyway. If you're hungry, sheep are relatively easy to catch, especially at night when they are penned up, just waiting for a sneaky thief to come along and snatch one.

Maybe it would help if we understood how at least some of the shepherds of Jesus' day built their sheep pens. There are a lot of stones in the Holy Land. In fact, it would be difficult in many places to pick up a stone and throw it in any direction without hitting another stone. What do you do when you have a superabundance of stones? The shepherds piped up, "We could use them to build sheep pens." So they got to work. Biggest stones on the bottom, all next to each other, nice and wide. Next biggest stones for the second layer, almost as wide. Up we go to a nice height, all the way around the circle, except for one small entrance. Maybe we put some sharp stones, and some sharp sticks, and some nasty briars at the top of our stone wall all the way around to discourage wolves and lions and thieves from trying to take some of our

delicious sheep. Now we have a nice enclosure into which we can lead our sheep for protection at night.

"Okay, so we built you a nice sheep pen. Shall we get started on one for my sheep?"

"I don't know. Building one pen was a lot of work. How about if we keep your sheep in my sheep pen too. Then we can take turns watching them at night, while the other gets a good night's sleep at home with the family."

"Sounds good, buddy, but how are we going to separate our sheep from each other in the morning?"

"That's easy, friend. Your sheep are scared of me, right?"

"Yeah, you've got that high, squeaky tenor voice. Freaks them out."

"Well, my sheep like my tenor voice just fine. I'll step into the sheep pen in the morning and call out to each one of my sheep by name. As each comes over to me by the entrance, I'll push it through the gate. I'll keep talking so my sheep outside stay near the entrance until I've got all my sheep out. After I leave with my sheep, you can call your sheep to follow you out."

"I think this might work."

The easiest way into a sheep pen is through the entrance. In fact, as Jesus

says, ²*The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.* ³*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.* I wonder: does the Governor know your name? How about the President? Jesus knows your name. You are that important to him! ⁴*When the shepherd has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.*

If a shepherd, usually a gentle soul, thought someone was trying to take one of his precious sheep during the night, that thief found out how fiercely shepherds guarded their sheep. Listen to the disgust in Jesus' words: ¹*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.* So just imagine that a sneaky thief manages to move aside the prickly desert briars, clearing a path over the wall into the sheep pen. He gingerly scrambles on all fours over the wall, trying to keep all the loose stones from clacking against each other. Once he's inside, the sheep try to move away from him. Maybe the shepherd at the gate is sawing up a log or two with that chainsaw he stores in his nose at night. The thief tries to calm the sheep with some quiet words: "Here, sheepie, sheepie, sheepie. Come here, heh, heh, heh. I'm not going to hurt you... not much anyway." But, as Jesus says, the sheep ⁵*will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a*

stranger's voice. Here's the one place where a sheep's natural skittishness actually helps it. A sheep might not be able to articulate "Stranger, Danger," but that how God wired its brain. And because sheep are so delicious, it's a good thing they are naturally afraid of strangers.

All this talk about sheep and shepherds may be interesting, but do you understand the spiritual lesson Jesus was trying to teach his listeners? You probably do, but his words were lost on most of his first audience. ⁶*Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.* Who was the first audience? In the previous chapter, the apostle John tells us how Jesus restored the sight of a man who was born blind. This sounds like something to celebrate. But the spiritual leaders didn't like Jesus, so they jumped on the timing of his miracle. Jesus, you see, had healed the man on the Sabbath day! He had worked on a **Saturday**, their day of rest!

But Jesus wants everyone to trust in him and have eternal life. He knows that he's the only way. ⁷*Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep."*

"But wait, Jesus. How can you be both the shepherd and the gate?"

"Well, because I'm trying to make more than one point here. Besides, in my day sometimes there wasn't an actual gate on the entrance of the sheep pen. The

shepherd on duty that night would position himself in the entryway. He himself would become the gate. And he would have the attitude, ‘If you thieves and wolves want to get at my sheep, you’re gonna have to go through me.’ *I am the gate.* I am personally invested in my sheep, having given up my life on the cross in their place. ⁸*All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.* Well, there were some good shepherds that I sent to watch over my flock. But so, so many of the spiritual leaders who gained the headship over my flock were in it for themselves.”

“Jesus, could you be talking about the spiritual leaders who hate you and hate the fact that you recently healed a blind man. And they can’t do it. And they are afraid no one will follow them anymore because everyone will be following you?”

“Dear sheep, look for this pattern in every spiritual leader. Everyone shows their true colors, some sooner, some later. My sheep eventually recognize the thieves and robbers who are not speaking with my voice, and their ‘stranger danger’ mechanism kicks in. My sheep refuse to listen to any spiritual leader who doesn’t speak with my voice, my message, my Word. My true under-shepherds [parents, pastors, other spiritual leaders] will point my sheep to me as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

⁹*“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. My sheep follow me*

into the sheep pen for safety. Then I set myself up in the entryway, and nobody gets to my sheep. Nobody! Every night they *come in, and* the next morning they *go out, and find pasture.* I make sure my sheep are well protected and then well fed, so they grow up strong.

“In case I haven’t been clear, let me say it again. ¹⁰*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*”

That sounds great! But what is “life to the full”? Translators have a hard time putting the Greek words into good English. Literally Jesus’ words mean, “*I came in order that they may have life and they may have over and above*” or “*more than enough*” or “*beyond measure*” or “*superabundant*” or “*exceeding.*” If I use enough words, you get the picture. Jesus is trying to set forth how he defines life. His sheep understand what he’s saying. Life isn’t equal to earthly niceties, because eventually all people die and leave behind all their wealth. No one has ever managed to take any of it with them. Some people these days don’t want riches but just enough to live a simple life, meaning a life without Jesus in it. There are a number of groups touting the earthly benefits of living this simple way or that—but without Jesus as Savior. If all you want is a nice life for one lifetime...? No, please stop listening to the thieves and robbers. Jesus wants you to have a life full of his blessings. I didn’t say “riches,” although you probably have more than enough

bodily blessings to maintain your life. Jesus wants you to have a life full of his spiritual blessings, and in this he wants you to be exceedingly wealthy.

If that's not clear enough, think of "life to the full" as a right relationship with God. 'Life to the full' is the same as 'saving faith in Jesus, your Savior from sin.' On Easter Jesus told his disciples: "*Peace be with you.*" We have that peace, that life to the full, because all our sins have been erased from our records, thanks to Jesus. This means so much to us that we now think about how we're living—we measure our words and actions and attitudes against God's dos and don'ts in the New Testament, and we keep trying to live in ways that honor our Redeemer. Death will come knocking someday. But we don't have to fear death. We don't have to fear the judgment either—we already know what the verdict will be. We're safe in Jesus' sheep pen because of him. We're secure because of him. The thieves and robbers will never be able to force us away from him. When the spiritual leaders of Jesus' day tried to get Jesus' sheep away from him, his attitude was, "Over my dead body!" So they killed him.

But Jesus didn't stay dead. And now he can never die again. Death no longer has the mastery over him. He's the one who says, "Come, dear sheep, follow me."

"Jesus, does having 'life to the full' mean we will be free from all earthly troubles?"

"No, all the people who have life to the full still have all the problems of this life that they had before I brought them to faith, the same kinds of challenges that all people have. But my sheep know that there will be an end to all such earthly troubles. So they wait patiently for me to say that it's time for them to leave life on earth and join me in the home I have prepared for them. And in the meantime, they follow me into the safety of the sheep pen each night, and they follow me out of the sheep pen each morning. I direct them to the pastures where they can fill their bellies on good greens."

"Jesus, you're talking about your Word now, right? The Bible."

"Yes, that's where my sheep can hear my voice. That's where my under-shepherds learn how my voice sounds. That's where they learn to emulate my voice so that when they speak, my sheep can hear my voice passing through their lips. My sheep still listen to my voice today. They still run away from strangers whose voice they don't recognize. And they look at their own lives, the way I have chosen to bless them, the challenges I've chosen for them to deal with, and they see that I'm right there, watching over them, guiding them with my Word, holding their place open in heaven. And they say, 'I really do have life. I have it abundantly, excessively, beyond measure, superabundant. I am one of Jesus' sheep. He is my Good Shepherd. Life is grand.'"