

To Lay Down His Life

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[0 : 0 0] And you may like to have open the Bibles at page 872 to John chapter 10. As I said at the beginning of the service today and next Sunday and Good Friday, three passages from John, Luke and Mark to help us understand why Jesus died.

Now I know many of us have seen the film directed by Mel Gibson, The Passion of the Christ. And in that film you may recall as Jesus is carrying his cross or being helped to carry his cross in order to die, he has a flashback. In the film there are a number of times where Jesus has flashbacks.

Not all of them are references to the Bible and of course in the Bible itself we don't get told of flashbacks. But this particular one does give us a flashback to something that Jesus did say that is recorded in the Scriptures in today's passage in John chapter 10.

Where Jesus says, I am the good shepherd, I lay down my life for the sheep. Now it's an important passage in John, it's an important flashback in the film also.

It's important in the film it seems to me for two reasons. One is that it is one of the clues in the film for why Jesus died. You could almost see the film and not know why he died, just that he was the victim of a plot sort of thing.

[1 : 2 7] Just like in many respects some people could read some parts of the corresponding passages in the Gospels and think, well, is he just the victim of a plot? But in the film, the flashback and in the Scriptures there are plenty of indications about why Jesus died.

The other thing about this flashback to these words from John 10 in the film is that whether by fluke or by really good theological advice, Mel Gibson actually puts the flashback in a really clever context, the right context actually.

Because in the film, as Jesus flashes back and recalls him teaching, I am the good shepherd, I lay down my life for the sheep, you then see him walking past very closely to the Jewish leaders.

And that is exactly the contrast that John chapter 10 paints for Jesus saying, I am the good shepherd, I lay down my life for the sheep. Because the good shepherd is going off to die on a cross.

The bad shepherds are the leaders who are there watching him in the film and who are there here in the background of this chapter as he says, I am the good shepherd in contrast to the bad shepherds who watch smugly as Jesus carries his cross to die.

[2 : 4 6] Now Jesus begins this chapter about the good shepherd, which is a very famous illustration, rather innocuously enough. The opening paragraph of chapter 10 almost could be Jesus saying some general truths about a shepherd and sheep of ancient Palestinian times.

In many respects what he says is sort of obvious in a way. He says, truly, very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.

We could almost say anyone who goes into your house by the front door is the owner, but anyone who goes in by a window or breaking in, well, they're probably a thief or a bandit.

Unless, like me, a while ago you locked your keys in the house. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep, verse 2 says. And the context is of the shepherd each day taking sheep out to pasture.

And maybe in the context of a village, taking the sheep of various households in the village, the sheep would be brought to the household pens, and the shepherd each day would come perhaps and take the sheep from the different pens, calling them out, entering through the gate.

[4 : 02] The gatekeeper of each house would know the shepherd. Verse 3 says, the gatekeeper opens the gate for him and the sheep hear his voice. And he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

And then we're told in verse 4 that when he's brought out all his own, presumably from the different pens in the village, to lead them out to pasture for the day, he goes ahead of them, verse 4 says.

In our society, more often than not, if you see a shepherd so-called with sheep, they're probably driving them from behind. But in ancient Palestine, where Jesus' day and even today, the sheep of a small flock would actually lead them, not drive them.

And they would often, they would know the voice. Sheep would recognize the voice. And so they would follow the known voice of the shepherd, who would lead from the front, as verse 4 indicates.

The sheep follow him, the end of verse 4 says, because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.

[5 : 07] Now in a sense, that's all just Jesus' commentary, in effect, about what is normal everyday practice in the society in which he lived. Shepherds taking sheep from different households, leading them out for the day, bringing them back, the sheep knowing the voice, and so on.

But clearly there's more to it than that. We're told in verse 6 that Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. Well, presumably they understood shepherds and shepherding, but clearly they recognized there was more going on here.

And they don't understand what it is that Jesus is driving at. Well, from now on in this chapter, verse 7 onwards, these words become much more pointed. And Jesus makes clear that he's not just talking about everyday life, he's actually applying it in a very direct way.

His words are much more pointed. And at this point we need to understand some of the context. In chapter 9, Jesus has healed a blind man. But the Jewish leaders expel that blind man from the temple and drive him out, verse 34 said.

Now, Jesus applies the illustration to himself. But he does so in the context and in a way that makes it clear that Jesus is setting himself up and over and against the leaders of the Jewish people.

[6 : 26] Some of whom are listening in on his words here. Jesus says in verse 7, Now it's clear that this is a figure of speech, not just comment on everyday life.

It's clear now that Jesus is saying things about shepherds and sheep, but he's really pointing them to a truth about himself. Jesus says, Jesus says, Jesus says, Jesus says, I am the gate, the one who provides access, the one through whom the sheep will be fed and will be protected, the basic functions of a shepherd.

Jesus saying, I am that person. But now he makes the contrast clear in verse 8. All who came before me are thieves and bandits.

Well, who are those who came before Jesus? To whom is he referring in those words? It may be that he's referring to the pretenders to be the Messiah.

That is, we know that in the years of Jesus' day, immediately before it, and indeed in the few decades before it, the last end of the BC period, we know that there were a number of people who claimed to be the Messiah.

[7 : 41] Especially once the Romans took over rule of Palestine from 63 BC, there seems to be a heightened expectation that a Messiah would come along. And that heightened expectation breeds false messiahs, people who claim to be the Messiah of the Old Testament.

Jesus may well be including them in his reference to those who come before me, but not only them. I mean, after all, those sorts of people are the lunatic fringe of their society. But Jesus is now saying something much deeper than that.

Not just those false messiahs on the outside. He's actually referring to the leaders of the Jewish people. In his day, in the days immediately before it, in the decades, indeed centuries, leading up to Jesus' day.

They're the false shepherds. They're the thieves and the bandits. They're the ones that verse 10 tells us are coming only to steal and kill and destroy. They're self-serving.

They're not serving the sheep. They're fleecing the sheep, not feeding the sheep. They're the false teachers. The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day and of the decades before it.

[8 : 58] And in the immediate context of what Jesus has just done, at the end of chapter 9, that's very clear. The false teachers have driven out the healed blind man from the temple and rejected what Jesus is teaching.

See, this figure of speech, or parable, it's not quite a parable, I suppose. This illustration Jesus is using, not just to direct attention to himself, that he is the good shepherd, as we'll see in a minute.

But actually as a rebuke of the leaders of God's people, of Jesus' day and beforehand, for their false shepherding. They drove out the man from the temple towards the end of chapter 9.

You see that at the very bottom of the first column of the page, verse 34 of chapter 9. But the true shepherd brings out and leads. The language is clearly meant to be seen in contrast.

That's in chapter 10. The Jewish leaders, Jesus is saying, are thieves and bandits. They're there for themselves. They're not there for the flock. And that's where Mel Gibson's theological advisors, I think, were very right and very helpful.

[10 : 06] In showing this flashback at precisely the time that Jesus walks past the Jewish leaders. They're the false shepherds. And Jesus is rebuking them here.

But there's more than that. It's more than just a simple contrast between Jesus and the false leaders and false shepherds. The low point of the whole of the Old Testament, the first three quarters of the Bible, came about 600 years before Jesus spoke these words.

587 BC. The great power of the Middle Eastern world was Babylon at that time. And in 587 BC, and in fact the year before that as well, Babylon marched on Jerusalem, besieged it, conquered it, destroyed it, destroyed the temple, only down to the foundations.

And they carted off the leaders, the wealthy people, the priests, the king and others, off 1,500 miles away into exile back to Babylon. Leaving behind the everyday people of Judah, the Jews, to eke out a fairly impoverished and dispirited existence in the ruins of Jerusalem, with the infrastructure of their society and country destroyed, now just in effect a far outpost province of a Babylonian world empire.

Back in Babylon, amongst the leadership of the people of God, was one of God's prophets, a man by the name of Ezekiel, a priest as well as a prophet. And there in exile, in Babylon, in like a sort of refugee camp, a primitive version of Wumera or Nauru or something like that, God speaks to the people of God through the prophet Ezekiel.

[11 : 47] Very striking words. One of the reasons for those words to the people of God through the prophet is because how do you explain the destruction of the temple of God in Jerusalem, the destruction of the great city of Jerusalem that is praised in the Psalms and other places in the Old Testament?

How do you explain the end of the nation where God had pledged himself to the nation? Well, in the ancient world, the simple way of doing that was that the gods of the victorious country are greater than the gods of the defeated country.

And so the natural way to understand whether you're a Babylonian or an Israelite is our Babylonian gods are better than your Israelite gods. The gods Marduk and Bel and Nebo, they're more important and more significant than Yahweh, the god of the Old Testament, so-called.

And so that would be a natural way, not only for the Babylonians to boast of their victory, but for the Israelites to understand it, that their god in the end was not as powerful as they thought.

God hadn't failed them so much as being defeated by the Babylonians, perhaps. But that explanation is wrong. And hence, God speaks to those people in exile through the prophet in exile called Ezekiel.

[13 : 04] Words of striking condemnation on the leaders of the people of God. Hear this sample. Are you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves?

Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat. You clothe yourselves with the wool. You slaughter the fatlings. But you do not feed the sheep. You've not strengthened the weak. You've not healed the sick.

You've not bound up the injured. You've not brought back the strayed. You've not sought the lost. But with force and harshness, you have ruled them. So they were scattered. That's why Israel ended up in exile 600 years before Jesus.

Because the false shepherds, the leaders of the people, didn't do their job. They looked after themselves, but not the people. And so they ended up in exile.

Now in a sense, that's exactly what happens in chapter 9. Because the blind man who's healed is driven out of the temple of Jerusalem.

[14 : 07] The rebuilt temple of Jesus' day. Sent, if you like, in a sense, into exile. Scattered. Away from the temple that represented the very presence of God.

So it's history replicating itself, in a sense, all over again. So when Jesus says, I'm the good shepherd, and he's pointing to the Jewish leaders as bad shepherds, he's not just saying, compare me with them.

He's saying something much more significant about the history of God's people. They are the ones who drive people away from God. But I'm the good shepherd, who actually brings people to God.

And allows them to stay in the presence of God. Rather than to eject them from the temple and let the temple be, in a sense, destroyed. But the prophecy of Ezekiel, to which Jesus is clearly referring here, did not end with those words of condemnation.

Because this is the other thing about what Jesus is saying here. Not just a comparison. Not just talking about the false leaders bringing about an exile. But 600 years before Jesus came, God spoke to the people through the prophet Ezekiel.

[15 : 18] And not only condemned the false shepherds, but in that same chapter of the prophet Ezekiel, a turning point of the book that leads from condemnation to hope, God said another shepherd will come.

Described in two key ways. A descendant from David, the king. As Jesus, in fact, was descended from David. And God himself would come.

Ezekiel said. So that in one sense you've got a descendant from David who will come to be the true shepherd. But in another sense you've got God himself who will come to be the true shepherd in Ezekiel 34.

And of course in Jesus we see both things coming together in a way that probably the writers and the readers and listeners of the Old Testament would not quite have ever fully comprehended until Jesus arrived as God and human descendant of David all in one.

Perfect man and perfect God. Perfect man and perfect God. God incarnate. And so when he says I am the good shepherd, he's driving his listeners back to that passage in Ezekiel.

[16 : 21] Not only his condemnation of false leaders, but in announcing this is the time long promised when God would bring about the restoration of his people. Not just going back from Babylon to Jerusalem.

That happened. But more importantly, more significantly, more spiritually if you like, to bring the people of God back to God. And to a relationship with God.

To the kingdom of God. To salvation. In a relationship with God. And that's what Jesus is on about. In these words here about being the good shepherd. Jesus fulfills that long awaited prophecy.

600 years in the making. But now having said I am the good shepherd in verse 11 of chapter 10.

Jesus now says something hugely surprising about himself. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

[17 : 19] No longer is Jesus making everyday comment about what shepherds in ancient Palestine do. Because no good shepherd in ancient Palestine would really lay down their life for the sheep. They might risk some danger to fight off a lion or to fight off a wolf or something like that.

But no shepherd would give up his or her life for the sake of those dumb animals. Even though they might be the key part of the livelihood of the people.

You lose your life for the sheep and the sheep are left defenceless. And their lives would be at risk and gone. A good shepherd in ancient Palestine would live for the sheep.

Not die for the sheep. They might risk something for the sheep if they're really committed. But they don't die for the sheep. A shepherd's death would be a waste.

The sheep would surely then suffer and die. Shepherds, good ones, aim to live for the sheep. Not die. So why does Jesus then say I am the good shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep.

[18 : 20] What does that achieve? Is it just some tragic act of folly? Or does it actually achieve something? Well it does and there are a few ways of understanding that.

That this passage opens up for us. There's much more about Jesus' death and we'll see some of that next week and on Good Friday. But from this passage, three key points about why Jesus died that come out of this.

Firstly, when Jesus says I lay down my life for the sheep, he's making it clear that he is in control. He's not just an unwilling victim of evil forces.

His death is not an accident. He willingly dies. That's clear not only in this passage but elsewhere in the scriptures. It was clear too in the film about the passion of the Christ.

Jesus was actually in control. He willingly offered himself to be arrested. He did not fight back. He did not retaliate back. He didn't defend himself.

[19 : 26] He didn't call in armies of angels to liberate himself. He laid down his life. To the very point that later in John's gospel when Jesus hangs on the cross, he says it is finished and he offers up his spirit and dies.

That is in the end, his own life wasn't taken from him. He gave it. He laid it down. Not a tragic accident, nor is it a senseless waste of human life.

Very clear also in verse 18. No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. Jesus is in control.

And that therefore reminds us that his death is necessary. You see, his death isn't just the sort of epilogue of his life that is the key.

His death is actually the goal and climax, the reason for him coming. He came to die. He came not primarily to teach or to heal or to live a good life or to give a good example and then somehow in the end it all went wrong so he ended up dying.

[20 : 32] He came to die. That's the point. And he's in control leading up to his death. His death is necessary. It's not just a little epilogue on the end. An inconsequential event.

Not at all. You see, if we didn't need him to die so that we could have salvation, he wouldn't have died. But we did. So he did.

And we have. We needed him to die. So he died. And we have salvation. So that's the first point. The fact that Jesus is in control tells us that he needed to die for us.

And we needed him to die for us. Secondly, verse 9 tells us that again, as verse 7 did, Jesus saying, I am the gate.

When Jesus says, I am the gate, he goes on in verse 9 to say, whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. When Jesus is saying, I am the gate, it is the gate for salvation.

[21 : 37] Verse 9 makes that clear. But in particular, because it's in the context of him laying down his life, the gate is not just Jesus being a nice bloke or his teaching.

The gate is his death that brings us salvation. Now how that does that, this passage does not make clear. We'll see more clearly in two weeks, or on Good Friday, in just under two weeks time from Luke's gospel, or Mark's gospel rather, when we deal with that.

But here clearly, in general terms, Jesus is making it clear that his death is what brings access to salvation. Free access. To come in and go out and find pasture.

To find spiritual nourishment and food for eternity. Salvation comes from his death. That's why Jesus deliberately came to die. But also, notice that this is an exclusive claim.

I am the gate. Not one of many gates. I am the gate. If you want to log on to the internet, there's a range of internet service providers that you can have.

[22 : 50] They'll all happily take your money. And they'll all happily give you some access to the internet. Unlike such access with a whole range of providers, the provider for salvation is an exclusive one.

It's a monopoly. Jesus is the gate. There's only one salvation access provider. That's Jesus the Good Shepherd. A third point about this is the nature of the salvation, if you like.

Jesus says in verse 10, I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly. There's salvation. Abundant life. Life not only full and rich in quantity, that lasts forever, but life that's full and rich in quality as well.

The irony is that Jesus gives up his life so that we might have life and life to the full, life to the max, as they might say today. So often, Christianity and Christians are portrayed or caricatured as fairly lifeless and dull and boring and dreary.

You see that image portrayed in, say, something like the film *Babette's Feast*, where Christians seem to be all very gloomy. It was certainly my perception of Christians in my first year of university, that they seem to be rather humorless and colorless people in the college where I lived at university.

- [24 : 05] The opposite ought to be true. Christians ought to be people who are enjoying even now, not just in the future when we die, but even now, life to the full. Not just meaning enjoying to the full all the worldly pleasures that are on array before us, but life to the full in meaning and purpose with God, in a relationship with God, in richness of knowing God and knowing God's people, and having an eternal destiny that is secured by Jesus' death.

And the healing of the blind man in chapter 9, to which this is part of the context, is just giving us a glimpse of that abundant life. This is far, far, far removed from the legalistic, restrictive life that the Jewish leaders were forcing the Jewish people into in Jesus' day.

The abundant life that Jesus offers is full of the connotation of spiritual satisfaction. Indeed, John's Gospel in particular oozes with images of satisfaction that belong to the followers of Jesus Christ.

If we're not satisfied, then maybe we need to think again about the salvation that Jesus is offering us and the abundant life that is ours through him. Don't be fooled by the world's vain promises to offer you rich satisfaction.

They're fleeting pleasures compared to the rich and abundant life that is offered by Jesus Christ. So then we see here that Jesus died not as an innocent victim alone, not as a tragic accident, not as just a little epilogue on the end of a fairly noble life, but rather he died deliberately and fully in control.

- [25 : 43] He died because it was a necessity. Why? To provide access for the sheep to salvation. A salvation of abundant life, of spiritual satisfaction for eternity, richness in length as well as in depth.

Well, this passage also, though, makes clear our response. It's not something we look back and think, oh, that's very nice.

I've enjoyed looking at that. There's a demand within this passage. See, this passage makes clear what ought to be our response if we are the sheep of his flock. It's all very well and nice to think, oh, Jesus is the good shepherd.

That's great. But are we his sheep? And what does this passage say about his sheep? It says that his sheep know his voice in the end of verse 3.

The sheep follow him because they know his voice at the end of verse 4. His sheep will listen to my voice at the end of verse 16. And you see, Jesus is again saying those words in a fairly pointed fashion because he's making it clear that the Jewish leaders and the Pharisees and others who are around about him may well not, in fact, be his sheep.

- [26 : 52] If they don't heed, hear and listen to his voice. Hearing his voice means following him wherever, whatever, whenever. Following him with trusting and faithful obedience.

The Jewish leaders didn't do that. That's clear in chapter 9. The blind man did. He worshipped him at the end of chapter 9. There are too many Christians whom I call Mrs. Richards Christians. Now, I do want to apologise if there is a Mrs. Richards here.

I'm not actually, I don't think there is, but there might be. I might have got that wrong. I don't mean you. Let me tell you what I mean by a Mrs. Richards Christian. One of my favourite pieces of television is the episode of *Fawlty Towers* where there is a deaf and grumpy lady called Mrs. Richards.

And she complains about everything. Some of you, I can see, know the film. She complains about the room and the bath and the radio and the view. Mrs. Richards had a hearing aid, but she didn't always put it on.

She chose what she would listen to. When something good was being said, or when she might have got a lot of money or something like that, she was very keen to hear. But there are lots of other things she wouldn't hear and she'd have a switching aid turned off.

[27 : 58] There are lots of Christians like that who are selective in what they hear of the Good Shepherd's voice. They're willing to hear the nice things, but deaf to the demands and the challenges.

There's no Mrs. Richards Christian being spoken about here. The sheep hear the shepherd's voice without qualification. They follow him wherever, whenever, whatever because they hear his voice.

The Christian life is a life of hearing and heeding the voice of the Good Shepherd. And the sheep are not just Jewish people. Jesus makes that very clear here.

He may be attacking the Jewish leaders, but he makes it clear in verse 16, I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. Referring there to Gentiles who will hear and heed his voice as well. In all those old type pictures of Jesus the Good Shepherd holding a little lamb like a cuddly toy, he's usually looking very clean and very nice and usually clean fingernails and soft hands and his hair's beautifully combed and he's used the right shampoo and he's got blue eyes and a smile and very gentle, looks as though he's come out of an office.

Shepherds in Palestine wouldn't be like that. They'd be tough characters. They'd be wearing their King G overalls and their R.M. Williams boots and stuff like that. They're tough people. And Jesus was tough as a good shepherd.

[29 : 30] Brave enough, courageous enough and loving enough to carry his cross to die. To lay down his life for us. Bloodied and pained, yes, but primarily to die so that we may live.

Thanks be to God. Amen.