

The Gate

Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep..." – John 10:7

The shepherding vocation was one of the most important businesses in Judea. The Old Testament is replete with references to this image. Moses was a shepherd before he became God's selected man to lead (or shepherd) God's people out of slavery in Egypt. In David, the paradigm of a shepherd-king was established. His story began in his father's pastures where he tended Jesse's flocks. Of course, there is no more vivid image of God in His role as a Shepherd than in the opening verses of Psalm 23, which David wrote as he drew upon his own experiences as a shepherd. Not every king of Israel quite measured up to David as a shepherd/king. Ezekiel 34 is a scathing indictment of those kings (and other leaders) who missed the mark.

What image came to mind to those who heard Jesus say, "I am the gate for the sheep"?

In the ancient world, sheep would graze in open pastures. A shepherd might lead them beside still waters and into green pastures or protect them from animals with his staff. All those images from Psalm 23 were a true slice of life. This grazing throughout the daylight hours was for the nourishment of the sheep, but risks were involved. It is the nature of sheep to wander about. Apart from the watchful eye of a shepherd, a sheep ran the risk of falling into pits and ravines. One might encounter dangerous predators. Another might encounter poachers. Sheep were easily lost. Consequently, every flock of sheep was typically accompanied by a shepherd.

At night the flock was herded into a protected sheepfold. Sometimes, these were simple pens with wooden fencing. More often, these folds were enclosed by stone walls. Well before the days of barbed wire, resourceful sheep-owners would top these stone walls with sharp briars to discourage intruders. Legitimate shepherds (as well as the sheep themselves) would come and go by way of a single door or gate into the fold. It was to such a gate that Jesus likened Himself.

Only those who were up to no good, such as thieves and robbers, would attempt to negotiate their ways into the pen by any other means. The word for "thief" in this passage depicts guile, such as that of a man who would poach sheep to sell them or to try to mix them into his own flock. The word for "robber" describes a more violent character, such as a traveling bandit who might steal the sheep for food. The gate was the only legitimate entrance for those who belonged. When Jesus said, "I am the gate for the sheep," He was making a forceful statement about His exclusiveness to save. In fact, in the same paragraph, He added:

"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture." – John 1:9

Throughout history, the culture at large has recoiled against such language of exclusivity. We scratch our heads at the pluralism of the age that announces that there are many ways to God, but the world of the Romans was every bit as intolerant of the Christian message of salvation in Christ alone as is this modern world. Nevertheless, the plain sense of what Jesus said is clear: "Life, freedom, pasture, pastoral bliss, salvation – these things are secured for us only by way of He who said, "I am the gate for the sheep."