

## Abundant Life

### John 10:1-10

*Bryn MacPhail / Feb. 27, 2011*

Within this Gospel we have seen Jesus employ a variety of metaphors in order to identify Himself as God's Son, and to explain to others what He has come to do.

This pattern continues in chapter 10, where Jesus describes Himself as both "**the door of the sheep**" (10:7) and "**the good shepherd**" (10:14).

These would have been familiar images to the people of Jesus' day. The people of Jesus' day would have thoroughly understood what was involved in herding sheep.

I suspect that we are less familiar with this example (I have yet to see a single sheep on this island), but we nonetheless understand that the goal of herding is to keep a group of animals together and to guide them in a particular direction.

I wonder if any of you have seen the television commercial produced by a software company which depicts a group of cowboys herding ten thousand *cats*.

Cat-owners, like myself, find the commercial highly amusing because we know how difficult it can be to persuade a single cat to go in a particular direction and so we immediately recognize the impossibility of herding ten thousand cats.

And yet, I can think of something comparable in terms of its difficulty. I think you will agree that guiding a large group of people in a single direction can also be an extremely challenging endeavour. But this is where Jesus is leading us with His metaphor.

Just as a shepherd corrals and guides His sheep, Jesus promises to guide and protect all those who belong to Him.

As we consider the two metaphors employed by Jesus, we note that the sheep have two primary contexts: **the sheep pen** and **the pasture**.

In the sheep pen, the sheep are enclosed and protected from predators, and the wandering sheep are prevented from escaping.

And while sheep are relatively safe in the sheep pen, my understanding is that sheep are most happy when they are eating in the open pasture.

It is interesting then to note that Jesus doesn't simply gather us into the sheep pen and leave us there.

In other words, when Jesus saves us His design is not to create a 'holy huddle' that is entirely detached from the outside world. But rather, Jesus says in verse 9 that we "**shall go in and out**" of the pen (10:9).

Going into the pen makes sense—going in gains us refuge and protection. But why would we want to leave the pen?

Jesus says that we leave the pen to "**(go) out and find pasture**" (10:9). In other words, Jesus does not simply gather us to simply keep us out of harm's way. But rather, something more complete is being offered to us.

In the very next verse Jesus says, "**I came that they might have life, and might have it *abundantly***" (10:10).

Jesus promises abundant life for those who come to Him. That sounds attractive, doesn't it?

But, *what is abundant life?*

The answer to this question is often debated.

I was asked this very question by Wendall Jones on the JCN program, *The Platform*.

At the time, I answered Wendall Jones by saying, "Christ-likeness".

I'm not sure that I like the precision of my own answer.

Becoming like Christ is *the outcome* of abundant life.

But I don't think I should have equated the two. It would have been more accurate for me to say that the one leads to the other.

What then is abundant life?

Some take this promise to mean that if we are obedient to Christ, He will shower us with material blessings. Some equate abundant life with having an abundance of wealth, and freedom from hardship.

In theological circles, we call this “The Prosperity Gospel”. The Prosperity Gospel promises health, wealth, and prosperity in this life and the next.

But is that an accurate rendering of John 10, verse 10?

I have wrestled with this question of “abundant life” for quite some time. This morning I stand before you with a much clearer sense of what the answer is.

I think the problem of interpretation can largely be attributed to people detaching John 10:10 from the rest of the chapter.

Isolate Jesus’ declaration, and here is what you have: **“I have come that they may have life, and have it in abundance.”**

Detached from the rest of the chapter, I can begin to see how a “prosperity gospel” might emerge. However, *within the context* of the rest of the chapter, abundant life looks very differently.

So the context is what? *The context is Jesus using the metaphor of shepherding sheep to describe His relationship with us.*

Jesus explicitly says, **“I am the good shepherd”** (v.11).

*Abundant life must be understood in relation to the metaphor of our being sheep and Jesus being the Good Shepherd.*

If this is true, where else do you think we might look, in order to better understand the meaning of abundant life?

If abundant life is promised within the context of the shepherd/sheep relationship, then *could it be the case that the best picture of abundant life is provided within the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm?*

Let’s take some time to examine this familiar Psalm, and I’m confident that we will find here many of the necessary ingredients of abundant living.

If you asked me to provide a general answer—if you asked me to summarize abundant life based on this Psalm, I would say this: *Abundant life is the abiding contentment that comes from our relationship with the Lord.*

The whole Psalm is a picture of this, but the first verse says this explicitly:

**“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want”** (23:1).

In relationship to the Good Shepherd, we’re not in need. We have enough. We are satisfied. We are content.

As we read on in Psalm 23, what we find are *the ingredients* of this contentment and a more thorough description of an abundant life.

Looking at verse 2, the first ingredient of abundant life is to have *a restful soul*.

**“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters, He restoreth my soul” (23:2,3).**

It is my understanding that sheep do not lie down easily. Sheep tend to be too nervous and too anxious to lie down. In order for sheep to lie down they need to be free from fear, aggravation, and hunger (Boice, *John*, 749).

This is what the Good Shepherd provides. In the company of their guardian, the sheep feel safe and at ease to lie down. The first ingredient of abundant life is to have a restful soul.

The second ingredient of abundant life is to have *sufficient guidance*.

**“He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake” (23:3).**

It is a well known fact that sheep like to wander. Unfortunately, sheep tend to get into trouble when they wander.

They make themselves vulnerable to predators, and sometimes they unwittingly wander away from where food and water can be found.

Sheep need to be led. Sheep need a shepherd who will keep them in close proximity to water, and lead them to safe grazing areas.

It's not hard to read ourselves into the metaphor, is it? We are, as the hymn says, "prone to wander", and when we wander, we tend to get into difficulties. Accordingly, the second ingredient of abundant life is to have *sufficient guidance*.

The third ingredient of abundant life (my favourite) is to have *steadfast companionship*.

**"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (23:4).**

*Abundant life does not mean an absence of trouble.* Psalm 23 is filled with trouble—there is the valley of the shadow of death, and there are enemies. Life is not easy. Harm may befall us and those we love. This is the harsh reality that many of us know all too well.

But the promise of Scripture is that the Good Shepherd will never, ever, ever, leave His sheep. In the midst of life's most difficult trials, the Good Shepherd stays with His sheep—**"Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me."**

I want that for each of you. When trials come your way, I want you to know the comfort and strength that comes from having a relationship with the Good Shepherd.

It is an profound experience to have God at your side amid adversity. This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> ingredient of abundant life: *steadfast companionship*.

The fourth ingredient of abundant life is closely related to the 3<sup>rd</sup>. The 4<sup>th</sup> ingredient is to have *ample provision*.

The Greek word for “abundance” actually has a mathematical meaning, and generally denotes a surplus.

And you might know that the English word “abundance” comes from two Latin words “ab” and “undare”, which means “to rise in waves” and “to overflow” (Boice, *John* , 748).

Sound familiar?

**“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; *my cup runneth over*” (23:5).**

Here the image transitions to that of a dinner host. And what is provided by the Lord is described in terms of a 1<sup>st</sup> class host.

Nothing can deter the host from providing for His guest. No event or circumstance will compel Him to reschedule. Accordingly, the table is prepared even in the presence of enemies.



The reference to oil is also noteworthy. In ancient times oil was commonly applied to one's head/face for its soothing qualities and its capacity to make a person feel refreshed.

And the cup which is offered does not come from a stingy host. This is a cup which is overflowing.

So you see, the Good Shepherd accompanies His sheep in trouble, not simply as a Comforter, but as a Provider.

The Psalm pictures the Good Shepherd as giving more than bare necessity. The Good Shepherd is marked by lavish generosity. In His presence, our **“cup runneth over”**.

Those who engage the Good Shepherd in a relationship experience *ample provision*.

The fifth, and final, ingredient described in Psalm 23 is the promise of *a heavenly home*.

**“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever” (23:6).**

The abundant life Jesus offers affects the here and now. We can have *a restful soul* today. We can receive *guidance* from the Lord today. We can experience His *steadfast companionship* in life's most challenging

seasons. We can experience the *generous provision* of the Lord in this life.

But it is also important to bear in mind that the abundance offered by the Lord to His people is *forever*.

Moreover, *the abundance we experience in heaven will be vastly superior to the abundance we experience on earth.*

I want to leave you with a description of our heavenly home from the Book of Revelation, chapter 7, verses 16 and 17. This promise applies to the sheep who answer the call of the Good Shepherd.

***Never again will they hunger;***

***Never again will they thirst.***

***The sun will not beat upon them,***

***Nor any scorching heat.***

***For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;***

***He will lead them to springs of living water.***

***And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.***

Friends, you likely realize that multiple voices are calling for you.

The world beckons you, with all of her temptations and responsibilities.

I want to remind you that the Good Shepherd is also calling for you...and if you follow, you will experience what can best be described as *abundant life*.

