

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd) – Year B

RCL Readings – Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

ACNA Readings – Acts 4:(23-31)32-37 or Ezekiel 34:1-10; Psalm 23; I John 3:1-10; John 10:11-16

Seasonal Introduction. The fourth Sunday of Easter is often called Good Shepherd Sunday. Through all three lectionary cycles the traditional readings are John 10 and Psalm 23. In this season, we remember that Jesus had both the desire to save His sheep, despite the price, but He also had the authority to rise from the dead. This season's traditional greetings of "He is risen!" and "He is risen indeed!" can bring hope and light to our broken world. "If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. And if Christ is not risen—nothing else matters."¹

Common Theme. Shepherds and shepherding are the obvious themes in this Sunday's readings. Despite some peoples fierce adherence to independence we all need a shepherd. Unfortunately, the experience of flawed human leadership can convince so many people to think that they don't. The ancient philosopher Plato recorded that the best form of government was based on virtue and justice and headed by someone who was the best at all things. No human has ever achieved such heights, but the good news is that no mere man sits on the throne. It is Jesus who sits on the throne and the risen Messiah can accomplish all things as the Good Shepherd.

Hebraic Context. Shepherds at the time of Jesus ranked rather low on the social status spectrum.² It was not an esteemed career as the task of shepherding animals had passed from

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan

² Interestingly, the good news of the Saviour's birth was announced by the angelic host to lowly shepherds. Wealthy Magi also come to worship the infant Jesus marking both spectrums of society, the elites and the unpretentious lowborn.

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a familial and technical job³ ⁴ and was now usually given to servants and low paid hirelings.⁵ However, this was not always the case throughout history.

For millennia the ancient profession of the shepherd was thought of quite highly and became a major metaphor for the characteristic of leadership.⁶ All the patriarchs of the Jewish people were shepherds,⁷ from Abraham to Moses and David. There is something about shepherding that produces good biblical leaders.

Before the advent of coinage, wealth was measured in usable goods and services, which included livestock.⁸ Owning large herds of animals indicated you were a rich person and

³ Biblical shepherds generally lived on the edge of society as farmers did not want cattle and sheep eating their crops (although, during the hottest months in Israel after the harvests, sheep would be welcomed to feed on the stubble and fertilize the fields). In Judah, the edge of society was a wilderness. And so shepherds had to be knowledgeable about where to obtain food and water where there was no food or water, who to make alliances with, and when to move the flock. Shepherds had to be warriors who could defend the flock from predators in the wilderness. Shepherds had to be able to guide their sheep, keep them from falling into ravines and keep them away from flash floods (knowing hydrology and meteorology). Shepherds were also the veterinarians for their flock, binding up their wounds, caring for the injured, and expertly helping them through difficult births.

⁴ Exodus Rabbah 2.2 speaks of the skill David used in shepherding the flock. Psalm 78:72 says that David “guided them with his skillful hand.” The midrash explains that David would first take the littlest lambs to graze and then the oldest to graze, keeping the strongest and most choice lambs back until the weak and elderly had their fill.

⁵ This transition has caused many scholars to assume that Shepherds were thought of as poor, stupid, lazy, or outcasts—as seen in so many sermons. Arguments are made from Aristotle and even the Talmud to enhance this idea. However, while *Sanhedrin* 25b.15-16 is used as an argument that Shepherds were not highly thought of by the Jewish sages as their testimony was not admissible, what it actually says is that Shepherds who repeatedly and intentionally took their flocks to another's field to graze were considered robbers and the testimony of robbers was inadmissible in a court of law.

The ever-present mythos of Shepherds as great leaders seems to still be present in the time of Jesus. Psalm 23 and other Scriptures, such as Ezekiel 34, still highlighted the qualities of shepherds. People knew how shepherds should act. However, this vividly contrasted with the hirelings that were used as shepherds by many of the rich in His time. In John 10, Jesus does not speak of the bad shepherd, he speaks of the hired hand who was not a shepherd. Jesus and Paul both understood that a true shepherd wasn't someone who lived far from his flock but someone who was present and cared for each sheep—something that we are challenged to do as well.

⁶ Many kings, mythological figures, and even gods were known to be shepherds. Abraham and Jacob along with Moses and David were extremely talented shepherds in the Bible. But II Kings 3:4 also speaks of Mesha, the king of Moab, being a successful shepherd. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu is taught to be civilized by the shepherds he met on his journey.

⁷ When Joseph's brothers were presented before Pharaoh and he asked them of their occupation they responded “We are shepherds like our fathers before us” (Genesis 47:3).

⁸ Coins as a source of trading power largely developed in the Persian period, so quite late in history.

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displayed your importance to the community. The community itself was often centred around the extended family with the patriarch acting as leader and decision maker. This also tended to lead shepherds towards a nomadic lifestyle where the leader of the clan, the owner of the flocks, would move his encampment from water source to water source and from grazed pastures to fresh pastures because that was the best thing for his flock.

Shepherding was esteemed as incredibly important in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. The problem with shepherds in the New Testament was largely that they simply were not present.⁹ As urbanization took hold of society, the wealthy elites migrated from the land and farms to the cities. Hirelings and low skilled workers were then hired to guard their flocks out in the countryside, while the wealthy resided in large villas in town. Wealth may still have been counted in the size of the flock, but the owner did not physically engage in the day to day business of animal husbandry, instead trusting someone else to do the job.¹⁰

Acts 4:5-12. Following a miracle on the steps of the Temple, the apostles were arrested and Luke narrated the court scene where the apostles Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a legislative and judicial assembly of either 23, called the small Sanhedrin, or 71 people known as the great Sanhedrin. During the 2nd Temple period the great Sanhedrin met in the Temple courts at a place called the Court of Hewn Stone.¹¹ Peter and John appeared before what appears to be the great Sanhedrin, made up of both Pharisees and Sadducees, priests and scribes, the High Priest and his entourage.¹² This was the same judicial body that condemned Jesus, sending Him to the Roman governor Pilate for execution.

The inquiry began with the question “By what power or by what name did you do this?” In the ancient world names held power, hence the double reference in the question.¹³ In Jewish tradition, people could use or misuse the name of God to perform miracles. In response to the

⁹ Matthew 9:36, 26:31; Mark 6:34, 14:27; I Peter 2:25

¹⁰ The same could be said of agriculture. Many of the parables of Jesus speak of landlords of vineyards and orchards hiring servants to do the manual labour of the fields periodically checking on the expected produce. The landlords themselves did not reside on the actual land, that was left for the workers.

¹¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 88b

¹² Peter and John were originally arrested because the Sadducees, who had long taught that there was no such thing as a present resurrection of the body, could not have the disciples of Jesus proclaiming that they were eyewitnesses to a physical, present resurrection. However the Sanhedrin was not only Sadducean but also included Pharisees (who both believed and taught the resurrection of the dead). And so when Peter and John were brought to trial a completely separate accusation had to be brought against them.

¹³ Men could not do miracles on their own, they needed the authority of greater powers. This authority was not always assumed to be from God. In Luke 11:15 Jesus was accused of casting out demons by Beelzebul.

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question, Peter was “filled with the Holy Spirit”.¹⁴ God gave Peter the power to answer that very question.

The proof was seen and known by all on the Temple, the crippled man could leap. And so Peter did not have to prove that there was power, instead he rhetorically connected salvation and healing to the name of Jesus even as the Sanhedrin had connected the healing to a power or a name. Peter did not only answer the question—the crippled man was healed by Jesus Christ of Nazareth¹⁵—he also returned to the reality of the resurrection. This topic would be quite divisive in the Sanhedrin.¹⁶

The Temple leadership were amazed at the rhetorical skill of the apostles, assuming them to be ignorant fisherman and not acquainted with public discourse. The Sanhedrin were unable to offer rebuttal to the claims of the apostles due to the presence of the healed man in front of them. The unnamed man who was once completely lame, now stood completely healed as an eyewitness testament to the veracity of the healing in the name of Jesus. The question then was: if the healing was true in the name of Jesus, which it was (the proof stood before their eyes) then what of salvation in the name of the resurrected Jesus?

Psalm 23. Almost every ancient culture had a god and goddess associated with shepherding—it was an incredibly important (and more importantly to the gods, wealthy) job. In his prayer, David reflected on his experience of God. David opened this short psalm by declaring יהוה רעי, the LORD (YHVH) was David's personal shepherd. The equivalent statement, for David, was that (because the LORD was his shepherd) he would never lack.

As a former shepherd himself, David understood well the relationship between sheep and shepherd. Shepherds took care of all the needs of the flock. If God was David's personal shepherd then he knew without a doubt that he would be lacking in nothing. The relationship between other gods and humans did not have this equivalence.¹⁷ The Lord's provision went

¹⁴ Peter had already received the Holy Spirit in John 20 when Jesus breathed on His disciples. Jesus later instructed His disciples to remain in Jerusalem (Acts 1) to receive power from the Holy Spirit. While we all have the Holy Spirit, we can also be filled with the Holy Spirit when the situation and occasion demand. It is not a one time event but something that the Lord does continually in our lives and ministry.

¹⁵ Christ is used here not as a surname but as the answer to the question. Jesus was a very common name in the 2nd Temple period as the Jewish people looked to great heroes in their history: Matthew, Judah, Simon, Eleazar (Lazarus), John, and Jonathan were incredibly common, but Joshua (Jesus) may have been one of the most common. There was only one eschatological Messiah (Christ) that the Jewish people looked forward to—one who would have great power and authority from God.

¹⁶ Paul uses this same defense in Acts 23:6-10. For those who do not believe in the supernatural or miraculous, the resurrection must be absurd and even vile as it offers hope but also declares a power greater than our own.

¹⁷ Whether as Shepherds or farmers, when the gods had something of great value, such as the golden apples, they would guard them jealously and not share it even with their worshippers.

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even beyond the physical care to also spiritually restore the soul of David. He wrote of God as both a protector and provider who disciplined His beloved flock.

Without the shepherd, the psalm implies the sheep will face starvation and danger at the hands of predators.¹⁸ The staff and rod that David mentions in verse 4 are the shepherds' equipment used to defend the flock from wild animals as well as guide the strays and stragglers and lastly to discipline or punish a wayward sheep.

Psalm 23 changes tone half-way through, from statements of truth and comfort to interaction. Acknowledging God's actions towards us should lead us to come before Him. But another interesting point to note in this psalm is verse 5, in which God provided a table of food in the company of David's enemies.¹⁹ Hospitality and food was a point of honour in the ancient world, as it is in the modern Middle East to this day. Both Jews and Muslims trace the art of hospitality back to Abraham, who entertained the Lord Himself and His angels with hospitality and food.²⁰

Meal occasions are powerful events where people who disagree with each other can sit and eat together, fellowship, discuss and, perhaps, see something in the other person that they had not noticed before. Perhaps they may even rise from the table no longer as enemies but now as friends. God is gracious and so we too should be gracious in our actions with others. Today the Good Shepherd can still arrange those events for us where an enemy can become a friend. The Shepherd Psalm concludes with David's assurance that he will dwell in the presence of His divine shepherd forever. God's love and care is not relegated to this life only but extends into the

¹⁸ Many pictures of Psalm 23 show a beautiful field of fertile green grass where fat, wooly sheep can feed at their ease. In that setting, if there weren't a shepherd the sheep would likely still be fine. Travelling the Judean wilderness, where David would have shepherded his own flock, displays a very different situation. Individual stalks of hardy brown vegetation grow here and there amongst the many rocks on steep hills. These steep hills have what appear to be concentric circles around them that allow a sure-footed animal to get to the limited food. The "paths" spoken of in Psalm 23:3 are actually just the "circles" of righteousness—wandering off these paths could easily lead to death. Small, muddy pools can occasionally be found by the extremely knowledgeable shepherd. There are also some pools and reeds that might appear inviting, but they are often in ravines where a rainstorm a couple dozen kilometers away and half a day earlier might cause a flash flood. But there are also some times in the year where the wilderness springs up briefly with a beauty that can only be described by seeing life where life should not exist—the good shepherd knows where is safe and what is good for his sheep. There is no way a sheep would survive without a shepherd in these places.

¹⁹ God's provision "in the presence of my enemies" can be viewed from multiple perspectives. First, it displays God's blessing of those He shepherds. Even when enemies and rivals surround us and fight against us, God proves His faithfulness to both us and our enemies by providing us with not only food, but a feast. But it can also be an attempt at reconciliation.

²⁰ Genesis 18 has an interesting scene where three men came to Abraham. Two men continued on to Sodom "but Abraham still stood before the LORD". Abraham proceeded to have an argument with God. In Genesis 19, the two men turned out to be angels. While not explicit, many orthodox traditions believe that the third man Abraham entertained may have been a theophany.

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world to come. The Lord's character as the Good Shepherd is eternal and we enjoy it in this life but also forevermore.

I John 3:16-24. Not only are we made in the image of God, but one of the actions of the children of God is also to imitate God. As followers of Jesus, we are to love as Jesus loved. In the Gospels, Jesus did not die to defend His faith nor to avoid falling into sin, but rather, He died as an act of divine love for the world. Love is not something that is simply felt in the emotional sense. Love is also demonstrated by action. John tells us to “not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (v. 18). In John's epistle that means a love that is self-sacrificial and, in the extreme circumstance, a love unto death.²¹

In Hebrew, there is a phrase, *Kiddush HaShem*, which was used in antiquity of Jewish martyrs who died for their faith, notably against the Romans. In most cases of *Kiddush HaShem*, which literally means ‘sanctification of the Name’ of God. Ultimately, would they love God, preferring death instead of committing sin—such as blasphemy through idolatry, adultery, or being forced to murder another.²²

The passage opens by explaining that we know Jesus loved us through an action—His sacrificial death. Following His example as His disciples, we also should be prepared to sacrifice our lives for others.²³ We are not all called to pay the ultimate price, but we are all called to love. In I John 3:23 a single commandment is given, “Believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another.” This is not two separate commandments, but one. Obedience and belief are not strangers.

²¹ The word love in Hebrew is אהבה *ahavah* and first appears in the Bible in Genesis 22:2 where God called Abram to sacrifice his son Isaac whom he loved. Thus love appears for the first time in the Scriptures in the context of sacrifice.

²² *Kiddush HaShem* originally did not seem to refer to martyrdom. God commanded Israel “You shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel. I am the LORD who sanctifies you,…” How would Israel follow God's command? As a representative people of God to each other and the world, they should do precisely what God desired—they should be obedient in love, humility and justice. God's command, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain…” is often seen in the same light. (As a Christian, I profane—or take in vain—the name Christ before the entire world if I act in opposition to Jesus.)

But through time, as Jewish men, women, and children were confronted with a choice between disobedience to God or death, by choosing death they sanctified the name of the LORD and did not profane it before their murderers. The fullness of the term referring to the martyrs developed after the destruction of the Temple and the Sanhedrin's time in Yavneh according to S. Safrai in *קידוש השם בתורתם של התנאים*.

²³ The focus is on a sacrificial love for the brethren, those people who are firstly members of the household of faith. Jesus also teaches us to love our enemies but we should be prepared to die for our fellow children of God, our brothers and sisters.

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John reminds us that if we encounter a brother in need and we have the capability to meet that need and choose instead to neglect that brother, then we have done wrong and the love of God is not within us. We will know if we really do love God by how we are loving others. John calls it being 'assured' in our hearts. We know our own hearts by the actions of love we bear to each other. No one has to wait until the end to know if they have been saved or not, we can know it now with full confidence and assurance by looking at how we love our brothers and sisters in the Lord—assuming we do love the brethren.

John 10:11-18. The context for Jesus' declaration as the Good Shepherd is in a critique of the current political and spiritual leadership of His day.²⁴ Jesus began His response to the Pharisees by stating, "Truly, truly", which in Greek is a simple transliteration from Hebrew, "אמן אמן" (amen, amen). Similar to how we would use amen to this day when a preacher is teaching, the Jewish people would acknowledge agreement in the truth of what they had heard with this proclamation. Interestingly, Jesus did not ask for an amen after He made a good point, He boldly proclaimed "amen" twice before He even spoke. Jesus was going to speak plainly and openly and He knew what He was about to say was packed with truth.

Jesus spoke of thieves and robbers, strangers, and hired workers. None of these are good for the sheep for they do not care for the sheep, nor do the sheep care for them. Even the hired worker isn't attached to the sheep but to the monetary contract. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He will not abandon the flock at the first sign of danger.²⁵

Good shepherds care for each and every member of the flock and not just the people that think theologically like them or share the same politics. We might sometimes think of sheep as being all the same, but they are not.²⁶ Jesus knows his sheep, both as a community (the body of the Messiah) and as individuals. This relationship of "knowing" is reciprocal, in that Jesus knows his sheep and his sheep know Him.²⁷ The relationship is maintained not simply by grazing under

²⁴ The Pharisees of Jerusalem (many of whom had set aside their own teaching to work with the Sadducean authority in the Temple, unlike the Pharisees of the Galilee who largely continued to teach and walk in accordance with Scripture) had just asked, "Are we also blind?" In response, Jesus explained what a loving leadership should look like. We find a similar critique in the days of Isaiah (Isaiah 56:9-12) and would likely be able to make the same critique in every other period in history, including our own.

²⁵ Jesus also does not simply give His flock over to a hired worker. He maintains His relationship with His flock. And woe be the pastor (shepherd) who acts simply as a hired worker, looking only at the contract and paycheck.

²⁶ In a paper presented in Psychology Today, Dr Marc Bekoff PhD noted that the common misconception of sheep is that they are dull-minded, lack uniqueness and independence and have no personality. His research concludes that actually: "Sheep do care about their own lives and how they are treated and respond to similar situations in similar ways to humans. Nothing we've learned about sheep gives us a free pass to mistreat them based on myths about their "mindlessness." They are intelligent, complex, and feeling individuals."

²⁷ To Jesus' Jewish audience, knowing someone was not simply knowing of someone's existence. Knowing someone signified a deep relationship, the example in John 10:15 is the knowledge the Father

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the watchful eye of the shepherd but by heeding His voice—His instructions, and commandments. The good shepherd does not need to cajole and chastise His sheep constantly, they happily follow after him. Our job is to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, both as a community and as individuals, and walk after Him.

Jesus also proclaimed a message that has been clear throughout Scripture, but that He rarely spoke of. “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen, I must bring them also.” And, “There will be one flock and one shepherd”. Some take this to mean ecclesiastical unity into one church and so resent all denominations and slight differences of theology, however, the messianic point is that Jews and Gentiles will both accept the lordship of God and His Messiah.

One aspect of the messianic task was the bringing of the light to the Gentiles so that they too may worship the living God. The psalms proclaimed that the Gentiles will also one day worship the Lord (Psalm 117). The prophets declared that, in the future, the Gentiles will celebrate Sukkot in universal adoration of God (Zech 14). And Isaiah prophesied that the Sovereign Lord would gather not just the exile of Israel but others not of Israel (Isa 56:6-8). God always wanted to gather the people of God to Himself and to live with them. This includes Gentiles.²⁸

At the beginning of His speech Jesus said that the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. Jesus says His Father saw the willing self sacrificial love He had (even before He went to the cross) and responded by loving the Son. Jesus also made the bold declaration that; “No one takes my life from Me, but I lay it down of Myself”.²⁹ Jesus also says He has the power, from His Father, to take His life back again, a hint to the coming resurrection.³⁰

Hebraic Perspective. When God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt he was a shepherd. Having answered the call from the Lord, Moses actually remained a shepherd—although now a shepherd of people. In Psalm 77:20 we read that; “You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.”³¹

Moses did not begin his career as a shepherd. He was raised into Egyptian royalty and not accustomed to hard manual labour. Exodus records an incident when Moses slew an Egyptian

has of the Son and the Son of the Father. Knowing is both understanding the moods, needs, and wants of the other but it also implies that you will act according to their needs.

²⁸ This does not mean that Jews and Gentiles will be the same. What does happen is that we listen and follow the same shepherd and are one flock.

²⁹ This should present a clear argument against the false libel charge of Jews being ‘Christ-killers’ as the Jewish people (or anyone else for that matter) ultimately had no power to take His life.

³⁰ The Bible states that God raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:32; Romans 6:4). But here, Jesus also has the authority, given to Him by God, to raise Himself from the dead. John 2:19 may be even clearer that Jesus would raise Himself from the dead, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

³¹ Psalm 77 and 78 both finish by describing how a hero of the faith, Moses and Aaron in Psalm 77 and David in Psalm 78, became a shepherd to God's flock.

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who was mistreating an Israelite slave. He hid the body and fled the country once his actions were discovered. He remained in a foreign land for 40 years and married a foreign woman (seemingly without any notion of returning to Egypt to help the Israelites in their captivity).

In all this Moses does not present as the hero type: he has anger management issues, is a murderer, and a coward. In one rabbinic midrash³² the question is asked, “When was Moses ready to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?” The answer is found in the rabbinic commentary where Moses was shepherding the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro in Midian. One sheep wandered away and got lost. Moses left the rest of the flock to seek and return the lost sheep. Not only did Moses find the sheep, he ensured the sheep received water—for the sheep had wandered away not to rebel but because it was thirsty. Following this event, God chose to meet Moses at the burning bush, for God had seen the compassion of Moses over one small lost sheep—the humble and caring shepherd was ready to be a hero to lead a new flock.³³

Compassion and caring for others, particularly the lost, is a characteristic of biblical leadership. In Mark 6:34 we read that when Jesus the Good Shepherd sought some alone time after the death of John the Baptist, the crowds followed Him needing more from the Lord. “When He saw the crowd He had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd”. For those feeling the call of the Lord to a leadership position or currently in a leadership position, you should first examine your own hearts to see if you have compassion, this is a major characteristic of good shepherds.

ACNA Readings

Acts 4:23-37. The book of Acts constantly highlights the strong unity prevalent in the early followers of Jesus (or seeking unity even during those times where there was disagreement). Having returned from the Temple, Peter and John reported what had occurred and the things the Sanhedrin had said. The community responded together in unity, “with one heart and soul” praying through Psalm 2. They recognized what God had done. This encouraged them to continue their prayer for boldness, looking for God’s further signs and wonders He would do through them.³⁴ God immediately responded by showing that He was in their midst, even as He

³² A midrash is a Jewish story told to highlight a biblical truth.

³³ Exodus Rabbah 2.2 (This midrash was recently highlighted in the animated movie, the Prince of Egypt.).

³⁴ These are largely the same people who, only months earlier, had fled and abandoned their master and been terrified they too might lose their life. Acknowledging that God was King and Creator but also working in their time, turning to God in prayer for boldness wasn’t simply cursory. They needed the encouragement we can only gain through seeing God’s power and faithfulness.

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had been at Mount Sinai. In a sign specific for students of the Torah, God caused the earth to quake. They were all also filled with the Holy Spirit.³⁵

Certain behaviours are often expected to be connected with the filling of the Holy Spirit. Here we find two such behaviours: unity of the believers and a powerful proclamation of the word of God. Acts 4 elaborates on the unity of the believers in Acts 2 where the disciples of Jesus were “all together in one place”. At Pentecost, when there was unity, God visited His people. In Acts 4:31-32, when God visited His people, they were made to be unified.³⁶

We also know that the Holy Spirit helps us speak powerfully.³⁷ In Acts 4:31-33, the apostles specifically spoke about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The resurrection was an extremely important topic during this period, not only regarding the resurrection of Jesus but also the general question of whether the miraculous was even possible.³⁸

Acts 4:33 spoke twice of great power, first in regards to the Apostles—they had great power to speak.³⁹ Second, the great power of God. So often in Scripture we find that God does not work alone, He works with and through people—usually through those who follow Him but sometimes through those in rebellion or even through nature. However, Acts 4:33 almost seems to be talking about two completely different subjects. First, the apostles were given power to preach the good news of Jesus' resurrection. But the grace of God's power that worked in the apostles was not to gift them with greater power to preach the resurrection, it was to increase unity and

³⁵ Once again we note that the experience of the Holy Spirit filling the disciples at Pentecost was not a one time event. The Holy Spirit is always with us but, as we have noted before, we should desire to be filled with the Spirit everyday.

³⁶ Unity among God's people is important to God. Exodus 19:1-2 and 8 was used by early Jewish scholars to show that God met with Israel only when they could become one. Acts 2, and here in Acts 4, show that God still meets with those who are unified. Conversely, Jesus is clear in Matthew 5:23-24 that if we lack unity and peace with our brothers we should first fix that before we go to God.

³⁷ Peter's speech in Acts 2 is, perhaps, the best known speech from the Apostles following the filling of the Holy Spirit, where he speaks boldly of Jesus as sent by God with authority, Jesus crucified and with authority raised from the dead, and that Jesus is both Lord and Messiah. But Acts 13:51-14:1 is another example of Paul and Barnabas being filled with the Holy Spirit before powerfully preaching in Iconium. (See also Acts 11:24).

³⁸ The Sadducee's are famous for not believing in the resurrection during the last 2nd Temple period. While the majority of Jewish scholars and people believed in the resurrection during Jesus' lifetime, it was often in relation to an eschatological event. The resurrection as a present reality, even with the examples in the Hebrew Bible, was rarely included as part of a practical part of Jewish life (as shown even in Martha's response to Jesus after the death of Lazarus).

³⁹ The Gospels note that Jesus spoke like one who had authority. In the 1st century, teachers would very rarely get up and teach without referencing an earlier teacher. Jesus, on the other hand, always spoke directly on the passage of Scripture He was handed to read in the synagogue. As His disciples, the Apostles spoke in the name of Jesus—under His authority. The Apostles constantly referred back to Jesus as they taught but they were given the authority to do so by Jesus.

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practical love. If these two matters seem unconnected, perhaps we should reexamine what authority and power we are given because of Jesus' resurrection, His ascension, His intercession, and God's gift of the Holy Spirit.

The unity of the believers became more and more evident through their actions of generosity. Love for their fellow believer was expressed by dramatic generosity.⁴⁰ This is godliness and the imitation of God. The Lord is generous and He expects His followers to be generous too. This unity, among those who had witnessed the resurrection, further gave credence to the resurrection.

Ezekiel 34:1-10. Ezekiel⁴¹ presents a strong rebuke against the civil and religious leadership of the people of Israel. Ezekiel was instructed by God to prophesy against the Shepherds of Israel. We note that the prophecy is not an utterance of what will befall people in the future, it is also not a warning of impending judgment. The prophecy of Ezekiel is a current day rebuke! This

⁴⁰ People sold land and houses and shared the wealth, described as "having all things in common". This should not be equated with an early form of the Israeli Kibbutz movement or an argument for socialism. This does not mean that people went and sold everything they had—this would simply mean they would, in turn, require assistance and hand-outs. The example given of Joseph (a Levite who, though he lived outside the land, still knew and followed God and His Messiah and knew his own tribe—like all the rest of the tribes that continued to be Israelites, the myth of the 10 lost tribes is constantly refuted by Scripture, literature, and history) was that he sold a single field that he owned and the proceeds could then be used to help those in need—he owned the field and he chose to sell it (having all things in common doesn't mean that no one owns anything). What we see is the action of love in the form of dramatic generosity.

⁴¹ Ezekiel is identified often as 'son of man', which in Hebrew is the way to say 'human being' or 'mere mortal'. In modern Hebrew the way you say 'I'm just a guy' is אני פשוט בן אדם *Ani Pashut Ben Adam* or I am a son of man. This is very different from the Son of Man character that is found in the Aramaic portion of the Book of Daniel. There the figure is messianic and eschatological in nature. When Jesus calls Himself the Son of Man, the people clearly understood He wasn't simply speaking of Himself as a human but rather through the lens of Daniel's prophecy by their response.

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should challenge and add to our understanding of the nature of Biblical prophecy. Prophecy is not about predicting the future.^{42 43}

The shepherds of Israel, who in this context are in Babylonian exile with their people, have acted inappropriately and have been self-serving. The leadership have been unfaithful in their mandate as leaders to care spiritually and physically for the people.⁴⁴ We should take care not to confine this rebuke to the past and forget its lessons but should take this warning upon ourselves in the present day. Jesus commanded us to “feed my sheep.” This is a command we ignore at both our own peril and the peril of the flock.

The passage in Ezekiel describes the actions of the bad shepherds, but doesn't directly say what good shepherds do.⁴⁵ However, we can deduce something of the character and actions of

⁴² Biblical prophecy is often a warning of the future, but that future can actually be changed. That is, what is being prophesied might not actually come about due to a change in behaviour—usually through repentance. The book of Jonah provides a good example whereby the people of Nineveh accept the warning from the prophet Jonah and repent, thus averting the impending cataclysm, much to the chagrin of Jonah. The prophecy is “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” The prophecy wasn't, “may be overthrown” or “repent and it won't be overthrown”. And yet “God relented of the disaster that He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it.”

This principle is, perhaps, clearest in Jeremiah, captivity could have been averted had the people repented.

“If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.’” Jeremiah 18:7-11

This did change as, after they refused to repent multiple times, God promised that even if they did repent they would be taken into captivity—although they could still repent and go into captivity with a willing spirit.

Perhaps, rather than waiting for the prophecies of God to rain down on our enemies, we should seek to prevent the catastrophes by praying and boldly (and shrewdly) speaking of God's love, justice, and even His chastisement.

⁴³ Prediction of the future within prophecy is one way (among several) that God gives us a chance to test the spirits and see if they are truly from God.

⁴⁴ When people live under unfaithful shepherds, the conclusion can quickly, but falsely, be reached that they don't need any shepherds at all. The result is that the flock scatters and becomes prey because “there was no shepherd.” This is not a good biblical situation to be in.

⁴⁵ Conversely, John 10 doesn't speak of what a bad shepherd looks like but describes what a good shepherd looks like. Although, it can be implied that a bad shepherd will separate himself from the flock by letting hirelings who only care for the money take care of the sheep.

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good shepherds by observing the opposite attributes of bad shepherd's. The qualities of bad shepherds are that they feed themselves—that is, they are self-centred and don't feed or care for the flock or the weak. There is no healing or spiritual care of the community and they do not go seeking the lost, thus there is no evangelism or seeking to help the backslidden. The bad shepherds also rule with injustice, described as cruel force. Some of the attributes of good shepherd's would be; a selfless care of the flock, a desire to heal and bring spiritual care especially for the lost and those who have wandered from the faith, a burden for evangelism and seeking those in darkness and overseeing the community with love and compassion. God promises to hold the unfaithful shepherds to account when He declares that "He is against the shepherds!". And God Himself will come and shepherd His people.⁴⁶

I John 3:1-10. In John's Gospel and in John's Epistles, "children of God" not only refers to Israel but all believers in the risen Messiah. John 11 closely connects the resurrection with the making of children of God, even those beyond the nation [of Israel]. Jesus described Himself as the resurrection in John 11. The resurrection is more than an event, it is a person and we have a relationship with that person—namely Jesus of Nazareth. Because of that relationship, we too have the honour to be called children of God.

John raised an interesting question: Can the children of God keep on sinning? I doubt John is suggesting by this question that people can live in a state of perpetual sinlessness, considering his earlier statement in 1 John 1:8, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." John defines sin as lawlessness, that is being in a position or state of complete rejection or disregard for the law of God. The antichrist is described as the 'man of lawlessness', the man who operates without regard to God's law.⁴⁷ In contrast, Jesus was fully obedient to the Father so that "in Him is no sin" and His work was efficacious to "take away our sins".

If sins are taken away can the children of God keep on sinning? God as a Father to Israel was always a Father, despite their rebellion.⁴⁸ Of course, He constantly asked them to repent (return to Him) just as I John also strongly encourages. However, John urged us to abide with Him (the

⁴⁶ He also has put human shepherds over the flock. If I am called to be a shepherd, I should probably examine whether I am humbly serving the flock or complaining about a paycheck and that I don't have enough stuff. I should probably make sure that I am not only looking out for the strong, choice sheep (the people that have no problem and I get along with, the ones that think and act like I do—and the ones that will give me the most money) but also for the weak, the sick, and the lost.

⁴⁷ Christians who continue to refer to themselves as those who are not 'under the law' should be careful where this actually places them. If we find ourselves in a position where we are not under God's law or Christ's law then we verge on lawlessness. Those without a yoke do still have a master, but it is the Enemy.

⁴⁸ See Hebraic Perspective.

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sinless one, Jesus) as whoever does so does not sin.⁴⁹ This is consistent with all other Scriptures which tell us that a habitual life of sin is inconsistent with being obedient to the living God. John warns against a deceptive lie that subtly suggests you can be righteous before God without obvious evidence of righteous living. One of the paradoxical aspects of the Christian life is the constant tension between human effort to save themselves and God's divine generosity and the gift of salvation.

John explained clearly that "he who practices righteousness is righteous". Dallas Willard reminds us in his book *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus Essential Teachings on Discipleship* that "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action. Grace, you know, does not just have to do with forgiveness of sins alone." Maintaining a relationship with the Sinless One involves applying His teaching and instructions in our lives, with the result of avoiding the state of lawlessness.

⁴⁹ The Greek tense is suggestive of a continual lifestyle of abiding or continuing not to depart from the teachings of Jesus.