

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

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In this paper we will discuss one of the seven “I AM” Statements in the Fourth Gospel showing its roots in the Old Testament concept of God and how it relates to Jesus’ miraculous signs and Jesus’ relationship with the Father and believers. I will also share my experience as a shepherd girl.

The Gospel of John embraces seven “I AM” statements. The “I AM” phrase was (and still is) a sacred statement to every Jew because it goes back to Exodus 3:13-15 when God revealed himself to Moses as the great “I AM WHO I AM”. God instructed Moses to go tell the Israelites that “The Lord, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you. This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.” Consequently, when Jesus Christ used the phrase “I AM” according to the Gospel of John, he was revealing his Godly nature to the Jews.

The seven “I AM” statements reported in the Fourth Gospel are:

1. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).
2. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).
3. “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture” (John 10:9).
4. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).
5. “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;” (John 11:25).
6. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).
7. “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener” (John 15:1).

These seven “I am” proclamations point to Jesus Christ’s unique, divine identity and purpose.

“I AM the Good Shepherd”

The Gospel of John highlights the statement “I am the good shepherd” as the fourth of seven “I am” declarations of Jesus. The full context of this statement is covered in John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” This concept and its exemplification is continued in John 10:12-16 “The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not in this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” We note that Jesus describes Himself as not only “the shepherd” but the “good shepherd”.

Jesus is “the” good shepherd, not simply “a” good shepherd, as others may be, but He is unique in character. The word “good is translated from the Greek word “kalos”. Kalos in Greek describes that which is noble, wholesome, good, and beautiful, in contrast to that which is wicked, mean, foul, and unlovely. It signifies not only that which is good inwardly but also that which is attractive outwardly. It is an innate goodness. Therefore, in using the phrase “the good shepherd,” Jesus is referencing his inherent goodness, his righteousness, and his beauty. As the good shepherd of the sheep, he is the one who protects, guides, and nurtures his flock.

This concept also appears in various Books of the Old Testament. Psalms 23:1-4 states “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil.”

The Prophet Isaiah also states “See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends

his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” Isaiah 40:10-11.

Similarly, the Prophet Zechariah highlights the central role played by the shepherd for his flock; that if the shepherd is struck, the sheep scatters. “Awake, sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me! declares the Lord Almighty. Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.” Zechariah 13:7

When Jesus declares that “I am the good shepherd” Jesus is making a contrast between Himself and the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Scribes whom he insinuates to act like “hired hands” (John 10:12–13). He compares them to somebody working for pay (a “hired hand”) who doesn’t really care about the sheep. As a “good shepherd” Jesus is ready to lay his life for his sheep. In John 10:9, Jesus speaks of thieves and robbers who sought to enter the sheepfold stealthily. In that passage the Jewish leaders (Pharisees and Scribes) are contrasted with Christ, who is the Gate. Here, in John 10:12, the “hired hand” is contrasted with the true or faithful shepherd who willingly gives up his life for the sheep. He who is a “hired hand” works for wages, which are his main consideration. His concern is not for the sheep but for himself. In ancient times during the time of Jesus, the shepherds were not usually the owners of the flock. Nevertheless, they were expected to exercise the same care and concern just as if they were the owners. This was characteristic of a true shepherd. However, many times some of the hired hands naturally thought only of themselves. As a result, when a predator such as a lion or wolf appeared, the hired hand abandoned the flock and fled, leaving the sheep to be scattered or killed (John 10:12–13).

The statement “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing” Psalms 23:1 comes from one of the most beloved of all passages of Scripture, the 23rd Psalm. In this passage and throughout the New Testament we learn that the Lord is our Shepherd in two ways. First, as the Good Shepherd, He laid down His life for His sheep and second, His sheep know His voice and follow Him (John 10:11, 14). In this Psalm 23, God is using the analogy of sheep and their nature to describe us. Sheep have a natural tendency to wander off and get lost. As believers, we tend to do the same thing. It’s as Isaiah has said: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his

own way” (Isaiah 53:6). When sheep go astray, they are in danger of getting lost, being attacked, even killing themselves by drowning or falling off cliffs.

Likewise, within our own nature there is a strong tendency to go astray. 1 John 2:16-17 explains this human weakness thus: “For everything in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” As such, we are like sheep wandering away from the Shepherd through our own futile self-remedies and attempts at self-righteousness. It is the nature of human beings to drift away, to reject God, and to break His commandments. When we do this, we run the risk of getting lost, even forgetting the way back to God. Furthermore, when we turn away from the Lord, we soon find ourselves confronting one enemy after another who will attack us in numerous ways. Fortunately, God chooses among us those who work in the pastoral ministries whom God uses to draw us back to himself. And like the early church, we also live in a community of believers that help to steer us closer to God our Father when we are tempted to run astray.

When I was a young girl, I used to tend our family sheep and I was always amazed at the behavior of sheep. Our home was built on a slope of a hill leading down into a valley. At the bottom of the valley was a big river known as Mathioya. On the eastern side of the farm was a cliff that had formed through a mudslide activity during one of the rainy seasons. We had to ensure that our sheep were always tended and protected against falling into the cliff, or drowning in the river, especially during the rainy seasons when the raging river burst its banks. I learnt that the sheep are utterly defenseless and totally dependent upon the shepherd. And unfortunately, the sheep are basically not very intelligent creatures, and often tend to be copy cats. There is a true story that we always used to tell that may look like a joke – that if you have a flock of sheep in a pen, and you place a stick at the gate of the pen so that the lead sheep has to jump to get out of the pen, and you let the first two sheep jump and then remove the stick, all the other sheep will continue jumping faithfully until they all exit the pen. The third and the rest of the sheep just copy what the first two sheep did to jump over the now imaginary stick.

Sheep are basically helpless creatures who cannot survive long without a shepherd, upon whose care they are totally dependent. Similarly, we human beings like sheep, we are totally

dependent upon the Lord to shepherd, protect, and care for us. Sheep are essentially dumb animals that do not learn well and are extremely difficult to train. They do not have good eyesight, nor do they hear well. They are very slow animals who cannot escape predators; they have no camouflage and no natural weapons for defense such as claws, sharp hooves, or powerful jaws.

Furthermore, sheep are easily frightened and become easily confused. In fact, they have been known to plunge blindly off a cliff following one after another. Shepherds in Bible times faced incredible dangers in caring for their sheep, putting their own lives at risk by battling wild animals such as wolves and lions who threatened the flock. David was just such a shepherd (1 Samuel 17:34–35). In order to be good shepherds, they had to be willing to lay down their lives for the sheep.

Jesus declared that He is our Shepherd and demonstrated it by giving His life for us. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Through His willing sacrifice, the Lord made salvation possible for all who come to Him in faith (John 3:16). In proclaiming that He is the good shepherd, Jesus speaks of “laying down” His life for His sheep (John 10:15, 17–18).

Like sheep, we, too, need a shepherd. Men are spiritually blind and lost in their sin. This is why Jesus spoke of the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4–6). He is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us. He searches for us when we are lost, to save us and to show us the way to eternal life (Luke 19:10). We tend to be like sheep, consumed with worry and fear, following after one another. By not following or listening to the Shepherd’s voice (John 10:27), we can be easily led astray by others to our own destruction. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, warns those who do not believe and listen to Him: “I did tell you, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:25–29).

Psalm 23:1–3 tells us that the shepherd meets the sheep’s every need: food, water, rest, safety, and direction. When we as believers follow our Shepherd, we, too, know that we will have all we need. We will not lack the necessities of life, for He knows exactly what we need (Luke 12:22–30).

Sheep will not lie down when they are hungry, nor will they drink from fast-flowing streams. Sometimes the shepherd will temporarily dam up a stream so the sheep can quench their thirst. Psalm 23:2 speaks of leading the sheep “beside the quiet [stilled] waters.” The shepherd must lead his sheep because they cannot be driven. Instead, the sheep hear the voice of their shepherd and follow him – just as we listen to our Shepherd, Jesus Christ in His Word and follow Him (John 10:3–5, 16, 27). And if a sheep does wander off, the shepherd will leave the flock in charge of his helpers and search for the lost animal (Matthew 9:36; 18:12–14; Luke 15:3–7).

Finally, the shepherd cares for the sheep because he loves them and wants to maintain his own good reputation as a faithful shepherd. As described in Psalm 23, the analogy of the Lord as the Good Shepherd was also applied by Jesus in John chapter 10. In declaring that He is the good shepherd of the sheep, Jesus is confirming that He is God. The Eternal God is our Shepherd. And we would not want it any other way.

Throughout the Gospel, our Lord Jesus Christ showed us what type of Shepherd he was for us by performing many signs and teachings. A few incidences that portray Jesus revelation of himself as the good shepherd for both Jews and Gentiles is reported below.

Samaritan Woman

The story of the Samaritan woman demonstrates how Jesus as a good shepherd brought into the fold the Samaritans (Gentiles) who were despised by Jews. Jews considered them to be immoral and even avoided traveling through Samaria.

One day Jesus was travelling from Jerusalem to Galilee and decided to travel through Samaria. Many Jews refused to take this route from Judea to Galilee. Instead they would take a route that was twice as long. They did this because there wa hostility between the Jews and the

Samaritans dated back to the time when the Assyrians had settled in this area. Inter-marriage between these settlers and local Israelites contributed to the Jew's view that the Samaritans were second class people who should be avoided for moral reasons. The Jews considered the Samaritans as Gentiles. Numerous incidents had kept the ancient enmity fresh over the centuries.

Now the conversation between Jesus and the woman took place at Jacob's well, about half a mile from the Samaritan town of Sychar on the same land that Jacob had bought and given to his son Joseph (John 4: 5-6; Gen 33:18-19). It was about noon and a tired Jesus was resting at the well when a woman came to draw water. Jesus, who knows people's heart, recognized her. He asked her to give him a drink of water but she refused because he was a Jew and she was a Samaritan. Jesus told her that she was missing a great opportunity because he could give her living water. Spiritual water would be far more superior water than any that came from the well. The well water was just a gift from Jacob (John 4:13). Living water was the gift from God available from one who was talking to her. The well water was for temporary thirst. The living water gives eternal life. The Samaritan woman had only a vague understanding of what Jesus meant. Nevertheless, she asked for Jesus to give her the water so that she would never be thirsty again and subsequently, never have to go to the well again.

Jesus then turned the topic to her personal life. He told her to go call her husband and come back. Jesus, however, knew all about her past and that she didn't have a husband. The woman responded that she had no husband (John 4:17). Jesus commended her for her honesty, but pointed out she was not telling the whole truth, and informed her that she had five husbands before, and the one she was living with was not her husband. She was amazed and concluded that Jesus must be a Prophet. She asked Jesus why Jews say that God must be worshipped in Jerusalem and the Samaritans believe that God should be worshiped on the nearby Mount Gerizim according to their ancestors. Jesus explained that God is Spirit and "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks." John 4:23. The woman responded that she knew that the Messiah was coming and when he came, he would explain everything. Jesus revealed himself to her and declared, "I, the one speaking to you – I am he". John 4: 26.

The woman went into the village and told her community what Jesus had told and taught her. The villagers urged Jesus to stay with them. He stayed there two days teaching them, and they came to believe in him.

The Healing at the Pool

Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. He entered through the “Sheep Gate” where there is the pool of Bethesda. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. There was one who was there for thirty-eight years. Jesus asked him, “Do you want to get well?” “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone goes ahead of me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day when Jesus healed this man was Sabbath.

Thereafter, the healed man carrying his mat, was confronted by Jewish leaders who demanded to know why he was carrying his mat on Sabbath against the law of Moses. The man replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’” The Jews demanded to know who the fellow was, who had told him to pick up his mat, but the healed man did not know because Jesus had not identified himself to him, and had slipped away. Later, Jesus found the healed man at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” John 5:14.

In this Gospel story, Jesus heals a man who was disabled and had been at the Pool of Bethesda for thirty-eight years. His hope had rested on the Jewish doctrine that he would be healed if he was the first to enter the water when the angel of the Lord stirred the water. Only the first disabled to dip in the water was healed each time. And this disabled man had nobody to assist him to be the first in the pool. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, healed him and restored his health so that he could participate and praise God with others during the festival. Unfortunately, in the eyes of the Pharisees and Jewish leaders, Jesus committed a crime against the law of Moses. However, as a Good Shepherd, Jesus considered it was more important to tend one of his lame “sheep” even though it was on Sabbath. Because of this, the Jewish leaders began to

persecute him and Jesus told them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” The Good Shepherd is available for us anywhere at any time.

Jesus Feeds Five Thousand

Jesus went to a hill at the shore of the Sea of Galilee and a great crowd followed him. The crowd was following Jesus because of the physical signs (miracles) they had witnessed. When Jesus saw the large crowd, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people?” (John 6:5). Here, Jesus was only testing Philip because he knew what he was about to do. Philip answered Jesus that it would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite. But Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?” Jesus ordered his disciples to have the people sit on the grass. Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks to God and gave it to the disciples to distribute to all the people. Likewise, he did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” The disciples gathered twelve baskets of the pieces of loaves that were left over.

Like a “Good Shepherd” Jesus performed this sign, to satisfy the physical need of food for his flock. This was however, a prelude to the fact that Jesus as our Good Shepherd would forever continue to satisfy our spiritual needs with everlasting food under one condition: that we should believe, trust, and have faith in Him.

Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead

While Jesus was across the Jordan, a man called Lazarus who lived in Bethany near Jerusalem became sick. Lazarus sisters Martha and Mary sent a message to Jesus telling him that Lazarus whom Jesus loved was sick. It was a request for Jesus to come and heal Lazarus. When Jesus heard this, he told his disciples, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s son may be glorified through it.” Consequently, Jesus did not heed the request of Martha and Mary to urgently go back to Judea. He decided to stay where he was across the Jordan for two more days.

After two days, Jesus told his disciples to get ready to travel back to Judea. His disciples tried to dissuade him to return to Judea because the Jews were plotting to kill him. He told them Lazarus was asleep and he was going to wake him up. But the disciples told Jesus that if Lazarus was asleep he would surely wake up. It is at this juncture that Jesus told them plainly that Lazarus was already dead.

When they arrived in Bethany at the home of Martha and Mary, they found Lazarus had already been dead for four days. Many Jews from nearby Jerusalem had come to mourn his death. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she came out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. The exchange that ensued between Martha and Jesus was very interesting. Martha said, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha answered, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come to the world". After she said this, Martha left Jesus at the place she had met him and ran back to the house to call her sister Mary. She told Mary that Jesus was asking for her. Mary and Martha promptly returned to where Jesus was, and a big crowd of Jews who were also mourning followed them. When they came to Jesus, Mary fell at his feet weeping and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. He asked, "Where have you laid him?" They took Jesus to where they had laid him and Jesus ordered them to take away the grave stone. Martha resisted because she said there would be a foul smell but Jesus said gently, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God." So they took away the stone, and Jesus looking up into heaven said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take of the grave clothes and let him go."

It is worth to note that Martha and Mary who had a lot of faith in Jesus because they had heard him teach and had seen signs that he had performed, still needed their faith to be strengthened to understand that Jesus was not only the shepherd of his flock, but the Good Shepherd who loved and cared for his Sheep, and had even the power to infer the resurrection and the life in his Sheep as he pleased.

The Ultimate Gift of the “Good Shepherd”

Finally, Jesus summed up his mission by showing us his ultimate sign as a good shepherd. Jesus gave His life on the cross as “the Good Shepherd” for his own sheep. He who would save others, though He had the power, did not choose to save Himself. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Through His willing sacrifice, the Lord made salvation possible for all who come to Him in faith. In proclaiming that He is the Good Shepherd, Jesus speaks of “laying down” His life for His sheep (John 10:15, 17–18).

Jesus’ death was divinely appointed. It is only through Him that we receive salvation. “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15). Furthermore, Jesus makes it clear that it wasn’t just for the Jews that he laid down His life, but also for the other sheep: “I have other sheep that are not in this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” (John 10:16). The “other sheep” clearly refers to the Gentiles. As a result, Jesus is the Good Shepherd over all, both Jew and Gentile, who come to believe in Him. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).