

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds,

Session 9, John 10, Law

6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Alright, today we're diving deep, cracking open an ancient text to find a story about power, justice, and, believe it or not, identity. And the amazing thing is, it's been hiding in plain sight this whole time. So let's talk about the story of The Good Shepherd.

You know the one, right? When you hear that, you probably picture this really calm, gentle scene. But what if I told you its original meaning was, well, the complete opposite of gentle. Okay, so this all kicks off with a really famous line from Jesus in the Gospel of John.

And honestly, for centuries, people have been arguing about what he actually meant by it. You see, on the surface, it just looks like a nice metaphor, you know? All about care and salvation. But what if it's something way more explosive? What if it's actually a radical claim about power and who has the right to rule? And this right here is where things get really interesting.

It's all about how you look at it. So there are two ways to read this. The common view, scholars call it soteriological, is that it's all about salvation, you know, how Jesus saves his people, the sheep.

But there's a deeper reading, a Christological one, that asks a totally different question. Who is Jesus claiming to be? The argument here is that this isn't just some sweet story about saving sheep. No way.

It's a political and theological statement. Because, see, back in the Old Testament, a shepherd wasn't just some guy with a flock. It was a royal title for God.

So yeah, this is way more than a peaceful farm scene. It's a claim to be the divine king of Israel. So how would we know this? Well, the clues are baked right into the details of the story.

Because, and this is the crazy part, when you really look at it, none of it actually adds up in the real world of shepherding. The whole thing hinges on this hired shepherd who sees a wolf and just runs for it. But that brings up a really important question.

What kind of wolf are we really talking about here? I mean, think about it. When you hear wolf, what pops into your head? Probably some huge, terrifying beast from a fairy tale, right? The big bad wolf. Well, the reality in this part of the world was something else entirely.

So the Palestinian wolf, the actual animal we're talking about, is, well, it's kind of scrawny. It's a small, solitary animal. We're talking about 20 pounds.

I mean, that's smaller than a coyote. So the idea of a grown shepherd running in terror from that, it's just ridiculous. It makes absolutely no sense.

The threat is not what we think it is. Not even close. Okay, so none of this works in a literal, real-world setting, right? The wolf is no big deal.

The shepherd's reaction is totally over the top. And get this, under Mosaic law, a shepherd who ran away from an attack was automatically considered a thief, unless he could prove a real animal attack happened. So by running, this hireling isn't just a coward; he's legally a criminal.

All of this is screaming one thing. This whole story has to be a metaphor, a big one, about leadership. So what we have here is a political allegory.

The good shepherd, that's the true rightful king, which Jesus is claiming to be. And the hireling, that's a stand-in for the fake, illegitimate rulers who would bail on their people at the first sign of trouble. And you know, that leads us straight to the number one job of any king back then: being the guardian of the law.

Yeah, in the ancient world, you just couldn't separate the king from the law. They were two sides of the same coin. The king's main job, his primary duty, was to be the wellspring of justice for his people.

But here's something you might not know. The law of Moses, the one we all hear about, it didn't just pop out of nowhere. If you look at the history, it was actually pretty late to the party.

It came after centuries of other huge legal systems in the ancient Near East. And this is where it gets really fascinating. If we put the law of Moses side by side with its most famous predecessor- you've probably heard of it- the Code of Hammurabi, what you see are two completely, radically different blueprints for how to run a society.

Okay, let's break this down. On one side, you have Hammurabi's Code. It's basically civil law, all about property and keeping order.

And a huge thing is that it assumes you're guilty until proven innocent. It was also super divided by class. You got a different punishment depending on whether you were a noble, a commoner, or a slave.

Now, look at the law of Moses. Totally different ballgame. This is religious law.

Stealing isn't just a crime; it's a sin. It assumes you're innocent until proven guilty. And maybe most importantly, it was incredibly egalitarian.

The whole system was built on this idea that everyone was a brother in the community. And this whole way of thinking, this philosophy, it's baked right into the job description for Israel's king. The whole point was to create a ruler who is nothing like the kings of all the other nations around them.

If you look at the blueprint in Deuteronomy 17, it's pretty amazing. It's basically a list of things the king is not allowed to do. It's all designed to stop him from becoming a tyrant.

So rule one: he had to be one of them, not a foreigner. He couldn't build up a huge army. He wasn't supposed to make shady deals with other countries through marriage.

He couldn't just pile up gold and silver. At the end of the day, he had to be a brother among brothers. And here's the real kicker.

His most important job wasn't conquering new lands or building monuments. It was to submit, to submit to the law. In fact, the king was required to write out his own personal copy of the law by hand and then read it every single day of his life.

That was supposed to be the very center of his reign. So you see how it all connects. It's like a thread running through everything.

It starts with a good shepherd making a claim to be the true king, and it leads all the way to the law of Moses, which lays out exactly what that king is supposed to be like. The big idea is that leadership, the law, and justice itself, they're all supposed to be a mirror, reflecting the character of the ultimate king of kings. And thinking about it this way gives us a really powerful new lens to look through.

It's not just about understanding these ancient texts. It leaves us with a pretty big question to chew on, doesn't it? If law truly reveals the character of the lawgiver, what do our laws say about us?