

Bite Size Bible Study

Sheep #257

By Lee Logue

Jesus talks a lot about sheep and shepherds. How much do we know about sheep? Not knowing some pertinent facts will limit our understanding of what Jesus is trying to tell us.

We often think of sheep as unintelligent animals who mindlessly follow the flock. I know people that bristle at the thought of being referred to as a sheep. However, sheep are incredibly smart.

A group of sheep is called a flock, but sheep do not remain in flocks simply for protection from predators. Sheep form strong bonds with one another. Social bonds are so important to sheep that they generally prefer to stay with their social group rather than graze at a distance, even for highly desired food!

Adult females, called ewes, form strong emotional bonds with their lambs soon after birth. Ewes stay close to their young lambs and encourage the herding (or flocking) behavior. The young lambs learn this quickly.

Sheep communicate with each other through vocalizations, often called bleating. Ewes can recognize which lambs are theirs by the sound of their calls, and at just 12 hours old, lambs can also identify their mother through sight and by the sound of her call.

Sheep experience a wide range of emotions much like humans do. Many studies have highlighted the ability of sheep to feel afraid, angry, bored, sad, and happy. Not only can sheep feel basic emotions, but their feelings can be very complex. Other studies have shown that sheep can display optimism, pessimism, and empathy. Sheep are sensitive to emotional expressions of other sheep and can recognize emotion in the facial expressions of their flock mates. This is an important skill to keep the flock safe.

Sheep forced to live in isolation experience distress from lack of relational experiences. Sheep are easy prey for predatory animals and can be easily frightened, stressed or injured.

Sheep can form strong, lasting bonds with humans, often displaying affection, recognizing familiar faces, and seek attention much like dogs do. Through positive, consistent interaction, they can become deeply socialized, affectionate companions that may follow people, nuzzle, and enjoy scratches.

So, knowing this about sheep and what Jesus has said about lost sheep, let's take a look and see where the facts lead us and what this can mean for us.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the

lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep. I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Luke 15:3-7 NIV

First, we see that this sheep has been separated from the flock. Likely as not it wandered away from the flock. The old saying "grass is always greener somewhere else" is probably in play here. This goes against the herding training that this sheep has been given from birth. It is going against the natural and normal behavior of a sheep.

OK, first mistake.

Once a sheep realizes it's lost, it bleats for someone to come and rescue it. Always good to ask for help. However, it is not just the other sheep, and the shepherd that can hear the bleating, but it is a clear directional signal for a predator to find the sheep first.

OK, Second mistake.

The Good Shepherd and His Sheep

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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 of 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 10:11-16 NIV

A good shepherd provides his sheep the proper care by providing daily access to clean water, forage-based nutrition (pasture or hay), and secure shelter. Beyond these, he includes monitoring for parasites and predators, hoof trimming, deworming, as well as constant monitoring of the condition of the physical and emotional condition of each animal.

Happy sheep show their joy through actions like wagging their tails, engaging in playful behaviors such as running, spinning, leaping, and head-butting playfully with flock members, and maintaining a calm, neutral-to-backward ear position.

For the most part, the shepherds labor is not hard, but it requires quality time and quality care. Timeliness of sheep management tasks is very important. You must have time

to do the jobs when required and not put them off until next week or next month. You must have time to observe the animals and recognize their needs.

We often think of the Good Shepherd as coming to rescue us – but rarely do we think of the daily care He gives us.

If we are to be well and healthy, His care is essential to our lives. Our lives and the activities we do each day is dependent on His care and protection.

For our own sakes we need to bond with our Shepherd, to know and understand our relationship and His purposes for our lives. Like sheep we can appreciate His care and purpose for us.

Through prayer and meditation, we can form strong, lasting bonds with our Shepherd, recognizing His affection for us. We will recognize His familiar face and earnestly seek His attention. Through positive, consistent interaction, we can become deeply social and affectionate companions that enjoy each other's company.

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