John 10:11-18

11 ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.18No one takes\* it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’

When Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, we should recognize first that a shepherd who sacrifices his or her life for the flock is not a very effective shepherd; once one hazard is overcome, there are many others that follow. The life and health of the shepherd is vital to the life and health of the flock. Without a shepherd who is both living and present, sheep don’t stand much chance of survival. Jesus as the good shepherd lives within us, actively guarding us from harm.

But what exactly does Jesus protect us from? If we identify the dangers to be things like suffering, illness, poverty, and loss, the good shepherd doesn’t seem to be doing such a good job. Even the most prayerful, thoughtful, active Christians lose their jobs, lose friends, become seriously ill, and experience all sorts of suffering and can point to people who profess no faith who are healthier, wealthier, and suffer less.

Some think of Jesus as the good shepherd who protects us from a future damnation; as long as they profess the Lord as their shepherd, they are guaranteed a spot in some future retirement village, some spa. The way they see things, Jesus is not so active in their lives but suddenly becomes important when they pass through that veil of death into life everlasting. But such a shepherd fails to protect us from much of anything in this life and seems to wait for the sheep to come to him rather than actively seeking the lost and protecting the vulnerable.

So if the dangers are not things like illness, loss of loved ones, financial ruin, or physical death, what is it exactly that our good shepherd is guarding us from? The answer: the urge to run away from God. You may ask, “Why should I want to run away from God?” Yet we all have done it, and some continue to do it. The author of Genesis describes how this happens when humans make an attempt to “become” God by tasting the forbidden fruit and come to recognize their nakedness. Their very next impulse is to run and hide. The psalmist writes, “*Where shall I go from Thy spirit? Where canl I flee from Thy presence?*” Adam and Eve upon losing their innocence realize that the eye of God is upon them and always has been, and though they try to escape his gaze, they fail. God is the great Witness of our every thought and deed. He catches us picking our nose. He catches us wishing ill will on our supervisor. He sees us lusting. He sees our bad table manners, and we are terribly uncomfortable with God witnessing all of this. To use another metaphor, God is like a mirror in which we see our very soul; he exposes our own spiritual blemishes, our own contamination and lack of integrity. And we would rather not look into that mirror. Therefore we try to run from God.

And among the creative ways that we run from God is through religion. We create gods who we can feel comfortable with, be they benevolent, easy-going gods who guarantees our immortality and final happiness no questions asked – there’s no need to escape such a god - or gods who are flawed who we can compare ourselves to and say, “if I were God, I wouldn’t do *that.*” These gods are tame. These are gods we can live with either because they are indifferent to our flaws or they share our flaws. But these gods have no grounding in reality; they are products of our imagination resulting from wishful thinking. And every soul bears witness to the falseness of these gods. Atheists are right to reject such gods as human creations.

But the one true God is a God who makes us uncomfortable, and it is our natural tendency to run away from him by either imagining him to be a god we can live with, denying he exists, or trying to kill him the way a criminal tries to get rid of witnesses to his crime. In Friedrich Nietzeche’s famous book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* a character known as the Ugliest Man murders God. Zarathustra says to him, “You could not bear him to see you, always to see you through and through.” The Ugliest Man agrees and replies that God *had* to die *because* he sees everything, and Man cannot allow such a witness to live. One way or another we try to flee the penetrating sight of God.

The Ugliest Man lives in each one of us; he represents our own ugliness within, an ugliness stands in stark contrast to God’s holiness. But because we are created in the image of God, we know who we are meant to be. That image is carved out within our psyche. We have the blueprint of the perfect creation within us. And because that blueprint is an integral part of our very Being, we can no more escape it than we can escape ourselves. Those who strive to escape God seek annihilation because death is the only way, they believe, to escape God.

There is a good side to all our endeavors to run away from God: we eventually learn that we can’t get away from him and thus we are forced to know him. Paul Tillich writes, “a man who has never tried to flee God has never experienced the God Who is really God.”[[1]](#footnote-1) I’ve met people who have tried to escape God their entire life, but as they come to realize that this life is passing, they are forced to acknowledge his presence. And his presence brings anger and despair and fear as they are confronted with the ugliness, and the idols they have created to excuse their ugliness cannot bring them peace. They call for a chaplain or pastor hoping that they can be absolved, that they can make the ugliness go away, but no one save God can remove that; all my smiles and kind words cannot bring them the peace that they seek, the peace that can only come from God.

Which brings us back to Jesus, the good shepherd (I prefer to call him the *great* shepherd). The good shepherd knows how helpless the sheep really are. He knows that we cannot run from our ugliness, and we cannot live with it. The good shepherd knows that we need a shepherd, and not any shepherd but one who will confront death itself in order to save our lives, a shepherd who embraces our humanity and leads us in the paths of righteousness, who can help us to see beyond God’s judgment of our ugliness to the heart of God that loves us and is willing to endure our worst ugliness that would subject God to the cross. The good shepherd shows us that God is not interested in defeating us, as ugly as we are, but in winning our hearts by subjecting himself to our ugliest actions.

The Good Shepherd is the one who shows us how to dwell with God, not fearing his presence but rejoicing in it, rejoicing because this God is transforming us into everything we were meant to be, removing the ugliness so that we can see the beauty in ourselves as well as in the God who rescues us from the ugliness.

What’s the take-home message? Recognize first that you cannot run away from God’s gaze, as uncomfortable as it may feel to you. All those roads lead right back to the God in whose image you were created. You cannot escape God any more than you can escape yourself. Next, stay close to the great shepherd, the one in whom the Father was well-pleased. Know that he can change our fear to true joy in God’s presence. Know that he will lead you forever and will restore your original beauty and keep you forever in his fold.

1. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1955), chapter 6, “The Escape from God,” found online at [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)