

Thursday Evening Bible Class. Sheep and the Goats

16th February 23

Additional contributions to supplement Brother Russel's Introduction

Ezekiel 34: 17 And as for you, O my flock, thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I judge between cattle and cattle, between the rams and the he goats.

Matthew 25: 32 And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats:

In Israel, and other Mediterranean countries the breeds of goats and the breeds of sheep which are comfortable with the climate and have been there for centuries, have quite different habits although traditionally looked after by the same shepherd. The goats are especially fond of young leaves of trees, but the sheep would rather have grass. Goats will feed during all day, without the heat of summer affecting them; but when the sunshine is hot the sheep will lie down under a tree or in the shade of some rock. For example, Song of Solomon 1:7: *Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feed, where you make your flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turns aside by the flocks of thy companions?* The goats are bolder, more adventurous more likely to climb to dangerous places more likely to break into cornfields or more headstrong and vigorous and harder to control than sheep.

There are several species of Sheep – *Ovis*. Only one of these is the domestic sheep *Ovis aries*. There are no wild sheep in the Middle East – the nearest are in Kazakhstan, *Ovis Ammon*, others are Bighorns in North America. In fact, wild sheep are very much something of a rarity This is because sheep are very easy to domesticate, and are also easy to predate, and so are vulnerable to other apex predators. On the other hand, wild goats of various

species are found on every continent and pretty much in every country. Sheep are not spoken of in Scripture of being wild, whereas goats are – Job 39:1: *Do you know the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth?* 1 Samuel 24: *Then Saul ...went to seek David and his men upon the rocks of the wild goats.* Psalm 104:18 *The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats; and the rocks for the conies...* Goats have a tendency to go feral, return to the wild, and leave their domestication behind, and can fend for themselves, and do not have the same need for a leader or protector. In the breeding season, rams can be quite aggressive, and challenge one another to a butting competition. However, goats are far more ready to push with their heads, and are of course more dangerous with their forward pointing horns. This is why in the vision to Daniel in chapter 8, the Divine spirit, portrays these characteristics, where the ram comes worse off: Daniel 8: 4-7: *I saw the ram pushing ...so that no beasts might stand before him, ... behold, an he goat came from the west ... to the ram that had two horns, ... and ran unto him in the fury of his power. And I saw him come close unto the ram, and he was moved with choler against him, and smote the ram, and brake his two horns: and there was no power in the ram to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground, and stamped upon him: and there was none that could deliver the ram out of his hand.*

There are major character differences and personalities between these two species. However there are many similarities. Both can be domesticated, and will gather in flocks, can be herded, have the young same time of year, similar nurturing process and son on. and are used for meat, clothing and were both used for sacrifices under the law. Goats particularly used for sin offerings. Perhaps chosen again for the character tendencies of that animal. Because of their similarities, they are often led about flocks together.

At certain times it becomes necessary to separate the goats from the sheep despite the fact so they are looked after by the same

shepherd. This is because they do not graze well together and so it frequently becomes necessary to keep them apart from the sheep while they are grazing. A Baptist preacher by the name of John Broadus described what he saw on his travels in Palestine when he visited there in the 1870s: he reported seeing a shepherd leading his flock of white sheep and black goats all mingled together. When he came to a valley after leading them across the plain of Sharon he turned around and faced his flock he then says *when the sheep came up, he tapped it with his long staff on the right side of the head and it quickly moved off to his right; a goat he tapped on the other side and it went to his left.*

Just as the Holy Spirit saw fit to draw from the character of the goat and ram, to describe Persia being defeated by Greece, using animal traits to describe a lesson, so the prophet Ezekiel and the Lord Jesus did the same.

The animals themselves have no idea about their personality traits or characterisation. They happily munch the grass together, oblivious that they will be separated by a far wiser mind. The goats lead the sheep astray, without thinking about it, and the sheep follow, - as sheep do.

The wiser mind sees the damage that just one untamed mind can have upon minds that are content and settled. So, the time will come for a separation to take place, so that the flock can be managed, and led to peace and tranquillity. The he goats, and would be leaders who lead not through wisdom but through brute force and selfishness are excluded from the flock and will come to a very different destination.

In Ezekiel 34, the prophet in context is presenting the message from God, that the false shepherds will be judged. As it was the false shepherds, who allowed the flock to be scattered far and wide. These were the leaders of Israel, the princes, and priests, the wicked

kings, as well as elders who should have known better. The flock was left to wander, and no one bothered to look for them. However, God Himself promised to gather them all together again, and take them to good pasture, and caring for the injured and sick, those who readily come to him for help. Then the prophet explains more to the people of his generation of the message of God to them. Instead of speaking about the false shepherds (because in Ezekiel's day, they had all already been dealt with by the Babylonians) he noticed among the flock that was left, that there were sheep who were fat and strong, that there were goats among the sheep. That there was a lot of pushing and shoving with the shoulder, and aggressive behaviour, where the vulnerable and oppressed, the needy and weak were pushed out of the way. Human characterisation, described in a parable about sheep. God said he would judge between the rams and the he goats. The lean and the fat cattle. People who used advantages God had given them to oppress and take advantage of others. So it was that gradually the higher echelons of society were taken in captivity by the Babylonians, leaving just the poorest of society in the land.

In Matthew 25, Jesus uses the same characterisation, but applies it slightly differently. *And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats:* In the context Jesus is also explaining that a separation will take place based on the character which has been displayed, in how the weak and oppressed have been helped – or not as the case may be - see verses 34-46. The Lord Jesus throughout the chapter is explaining how behaviour over a period of time creates a personality type. Those who use their life getting spare oil for their lamps, wisely gathering talents, or being a profitable servant, - those who have domesticated their minds, and tamed their natural behaviour as opposed to wild self-serving behaviour of the rebellious.

Jesus describes the time of judgement in language which enables his parable to be applied to the judgement of those who have been his disciples, who have died, and are resurrected to judgement. But also his parable can also apply to the generation of nations who will witness the second appearance of Jesus, and they will be judged on how they have treated the vulnerable and oppressed over the years – *my brethren*. Nations who readily submit, and bow the knee at the name of Jesus and allow themselves to be ruled by the rod, will be led to better pastures, whilst the rebellious who dictate, and desire to be the **Greatest Of All Time** and push and shove, will be broken by the rod of iron.

For many, they have no idea in their ignorance on how their behaviour can determine their destiny. We have no excuse. There is still opportunity for us to ensure our character is meek, and lowly, submissive and content, and hear the voice of our Shepherd calling.

Brother Terry