



I AM...AFRAID

John 10:11

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Dr. Thomas E. Evans

At the burning bush, when God revealed his name to Moses, it opened up a timeless exploration into the very nature of the divine. The word “Yawheh” is sometimes referred to as the tetragrammaton, a Greek word meaning “consisting of 4 letters”. This is because, when the Bible was written, there were no vowels included. So, the written name only consisted of 4 letters. As a result of Hebrew grammar and the lack of vowels, no one truly knows the precise meaning of Yahweh nor how to pronounce it. The most common meaning assigned to Yahweh is “I am”. But there is also “He Brings into Existence Whatever Exists”, “I am becoming”, and a score of other possibilities. The key takeaway is...unlike other gods, the Lord is real.

This is where we must begin with faith. A readiness, a willingness to acknowledge the existence of something greater than ourselves, a being so vast and timeless that we cannot possibly comprehend all that God has made, much less fully comprehend the very nature of the divine.

God begins with this simple disclosure to create a foundation of belief which we can build upon. If you thought learning how to program your VCR was a challenge, just you wait. There is a steep learning curve when it comes to discovering who God is and, so, God has begun with the basics, with the ABC's of faith: “I am!”

As God's relationship grew with Israel, as with us, he reveals more of the divine character. “I am the Lord, your healer”, “I am the first and the last”, “I am God Almighty.” But there is one particular description of God especially pertinent for our “I am” series on Jesus.

During the exile into Babylon, around the 6th century B.C., God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel about “false shepherds.”

God had a long list of charges to bring against them: feeding themselves instead of the sheep, eating the fat, wearing the wool, failing to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind the injured, bring back the strayed, find the lost. And furthermore, these false shepherds ruled with force and harshness, so that they scattered and became food for wild animals.

These accusations were clearly leveled at the corrupt kings that had ruled over Israel. Apparently, in those days, the people had as much to fear from their own rulers as the enemies who were trying to plunder and pillage their towns.

Today, in our more complex society, our fears have multiplied. According to one survey, democrats are twice as likely as republicans to fear clowns (where do they get this stuff!)

This is what people have told me they are afraid of over the years:

- I am afraid of cancer
- I am afraid my spouse will cheat on me
- I am afraid the young, new executive is here to replace me
- I am afraid if people truly knew me, no one would love me
- I am afraid of my father
- I am afraid I won't have enough money for retirement
- I am afraid there will be no one to care for me and I will have to move into a nursing home
- I am afraid of going to Hell
- I am afraid of gangs in my neighborhood
- I am afraid of terrorists
- I am afraid of the dark

After detailing the long list of charges against the false shepherds, God proceeds to tell us that He will be the shepherd and, furthermore, he will put

his servant David, as the “One Shepherd” over Israel. Remember, this would have been 400 years after David had died. This makes this declaration a prophecy, so when Jesus says “I am the Good Shepherd” the Jews would have fully understood the ramifications and promises.

The Good Shepherd is the antidote for all that we fear in this life.

- The Shepherd is tireless, never falling asleep on the job; he always keeps watch.
- Even though people will surely disappoint us, the Good Shepherd loves us so much, we never need fear rejection from anyone for his love is enough.
- We need not have irrational fears of lack of resources because this Shepherd guides us to verdant paths in this life.
- We need not fear ultimate consequences, whether through our external enemies or our internal ones, because the Good Shepherd guards our very souls.

By examining how Jesus leads us through fear, we will be better equipped to turn to him in times of need. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus dispels our fears through keeping the wolves at bay, laying down his life, and strengthening the weak.

The Good Shepherd Keeps the Wolves at Bay

There are times in life when the wolves are meaner and stronger than we are and that is when the Good Shepherd steps in between us and danger. It happened in the gospels. A woman had been caught in the act of adultery. The false shepherds, the wolves in sheep’s clothing, were beginning to feel the weight of stones in their hands, readying themselves to attack and steal the life from this woman. She was about to die; make no mistake. Such stonings were real and, in some places, they still take place today.

The shepherd, in Biblical times, carried a rod – a long, straight, solid piece of wood and used it as a club to fend off predators. Jesus stepped in with his rod, but this club wasn’t physical. This Good Shepherd will not draw that kind of a weapon.

Instead his weapon is truth. And when he declared, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” they walked away, in shame, one by one leaving her free to go.

The Good Shepherd Lays his Life Down for the Sheep

Being afraid is really about being insecure; insecure in our basic humanity. We are flawed people, insecure about our relationships, so we fear intimacy. We are talented people but there are others who are smarter, wiser, prettier, and younger, so we fear being pushed to the side. We fear rejection, so we hold back ourselves. All these insecurities ultimately come down to being insecure in our relationship to God.

But, if you have the love, the devotion of the Good Shepherd, then you have nothing to fear. There are a million ways when “we like sheep have gone astray,” that the Shepherd keeps, protects, and guides us, but ultimately all our fears from the smallest to the greatest are dispelled by the power and sacrifice of the Shepherd.

Despite all his prodding and poking to strengthen us, ultimately, he is the one willing to do anything and everything to get us into those greener pastures, to lay down his life for his sheep.

And when you truly come to this realization, not just in your head but in your heart and your soul as well, your fears fade away. I think I have seen this most recently with George Dunn. Several months ago, when he knew his life on this earth had only a few days left, all worry about grasping for more went away, any fear about his fate was handed over to his Lord. He was utterly clear about where he was headed. Rather than worrying about his destination, he was more curious about the *process* of getting there. We had some very interesting conversations!

The Good Shepherd Strengthens the Weak

Because the Good Shepherd has assured us of our destination, we are strengthened to act courageously in this life. There are some wolves we can learn to fight on our own. In addition to the rod,

the shepherd also carried a staff. You remember this from the 23rd Psalm, “Thy rod and staff, they comfort me.” While the rod was used on predators, the staff was used on the sheep, what we call the shepherd’s crook. It was used for mild correction or redirecting. Jesus not only protects us with the club but strengthens us through proper use of the staff. By prodding and poking, we are trained into walking safer paths in life, perhaps even finding those lovely greener pastures promised in the 23rd Psalm.

I have made some truly rash, boneheaded decisions because of fear. Some of you have heard me share my story of when I moved to Virginia Beach, after teaching High School math. We made that move because, half way through the school year, we had the joy of learning we were expecting our first child.

I panicked. I feared I would not have enough money from my teacher’s salary, so I contacted the career placement services at William & Mary. I searched for the ones with the highest potential income and started calling and when I called the third one I was lured hook, line, and sinker! The man on the other end of the phone was incredibly enthusiastic. I still remember what he said. “Tom, this is a red-letter day! Mark it on your calendar because this is going to be one of your top five days in your life. You will make plenty of money to care for that new baby and lovely wife of yours. A red-letter day, Tom. Mark my words!” Well, he was right, I have not forgotten that day.

I was a sucker. We moved down to Virginia Beach when Wendy was 7 months pregnant. But I should have known better. I would have if I had been paying attention. It was right in the name of the company. You won’t believe me when I tell you – “Wolf and Associates.” Those wolves played upon my fears and they had me!

But Jesus, the Good Shepherd was there. No, he didn’t miraculously fix it all. When I found out the company was corrupt, I had to scramble to find another job. We had to move again, this time into

my mother’s house. But he led Wendy and I to a Bible study group. He led us to several other couples expecting their first child. Through that hard first year of Elizabeth’s life, which I made harder because of my fearful decision, he strengthened my faith, made me that much wiser and more ready to spot and fend off other wolves that came my way.

There is a lot in this world to be afraid of. The Bible knows this. The word “fear” appears over 500 times! But the Bible declares “Fear not” dozens of times, because Jesus is the Good Shepherd and he scatters the wolves, strengthens us against them and has laid down his life for us.

Psalm 27 has it right, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”