

SHEEP AND GOATS AND SCRIPTURE
FROM ECHOES OF EDEN
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Sheep are mentioned 187 times in 178 verses of Scripture. Goats are mentioned 97 times in 95 verses. Both species because they were widely used in sacrifices, but goats were used as sin offerings, and the scape goat, while sheep were not.

Why would Jesus send goats to Hell as in Matthew 25:31-46? Why did the sheep go to Heaven?

Jesus spoke in parable—often about farming. Because the people of His day understood agriculture a whole lot better than people do today, He expected that they would know the difference between the behavior of sheep and goats and apply the parable aptly. In this day, we need help because so few people have such experiences.

Having raised both sheep and goats for over forty years, I have observed five reasons why the goats were sent to perdition, and the sheep were gathered in lovingly—figuratively.

Now, my preference still lies with the goats. They have more intelligence and more personality than sheep, and they are more adventurous and independent.

But, as Jesus implied we need the faith of little children (Mat. 18:2-5 and 19:14), He is also implying that we need the dependence of sheep to enter God's kingdom (Mat. 25:31-34).

My experience with sheep has led me to believe that most of them are completely stupid. That's humbling when both the Bible and science compare us with sheep. In my college biology classes, brain studies were usually done with sheep brains because they more closely resemble human brains than many other kinds.

Since sheep appear less intelligent than goats, and are less able to govern themselves, they are drawn more tightly into herds. There is safety in numbers.

1) Jesus said he wants His followers to be unified—one mind, one body, with Him as Head (Phil. 2:2). It's difficult to unify goats because of their independence. Gregarious goats also like herd living, but they are more likely to wander off on their own or butt heads to establish their own leadership than cooperate with the herd and accept the goatherd as leader.

Sheep are more likely to cluster in a flock, especially if they have a shepherd nearby they can trust and rely on, and Jesus wants to be that Shepherd for His flock. It's hard to shepherd a flock that won't stay together, and goats spread out more.

The Israelites used a scapegoat to rid the nation of its sins (Lev. 16:8-22). It could never have

used a scape sheep, because no sheep would leave the flock and stay out in the wilderness alone.

2) Sheep NEED a strong leader to follow. Even though they have their "butting order," they can't usually come up with a strong leader of their own. That is why a goat is often used in a sheep flock as a leader, including the "Judas goat" that leads sheep to slaughter.

If sheep don't have a leader, they have to be driven, and a good dog can drive sheep anywhere the shepherd wants them to go. My border collies always drove the sheep home after they were found and gathered.

However, my borders learned that it's difficult to drive goats, who compete with one another for leadership. So my dogs, after the goat herd was rounded up and the leader "eyed" into submission, turned and led the goats home.

Goats are leaders to sheep, but they will follow a stronger leader. Besides following the border collies, we watched the goats several times follow a coyote up the hill. We do not understand why our goats would want to follow a predator, but probably Jesus doesn't understand when His people turn and follow the enemy either.

Sheep are not likely to do that. They scatter from the enemy. Jesus would appreciate that, especially when He knows they will gather again when they hear His voice.

3) Goats, because of their intelligence, are curious creatures. Most will approach anyone who looks like he might have some thing to offer—feed, entertainment, coddling, or curiosity satisfaction. It's difficult to photograph goats standing free because they come to investigate the camera. Goats will also come when they are called, but they take some time to consider first, "What does this person have to offer me?"

Sheep definitely do not behave in those ways. They have no curiosity to scrutinize anything. They appear to fear everything. Sheep will not approach anyone whose voice they do not recognize. If a stranger advances, the sheep scatter as they do when a coyote approaches. Even if the sheep are called, they will not respond unless they recognize the voice. If the voice is familiar, they will turn and follow instantly as one. That is why Jesus made reference to His sheep knowing His voice (John 10:4-5).

Those are characteristics Jesus wants in His followers: running in fear from the enemy and immediate response to a call from their shepherd.

4) Sheep are more helpless than goats. Goats can fend for themselves, finding forage on their own, even when it means escaping their pen. Although both species are somewhat creatures of habit, goats will often explore new areas to find new things to eat. Sheep seldom venture out of known pastures.

One form of helplessness sheep exhibit is being "cast down." A sheep, especially a pregnant one, a fat one, or one carrying a heavy fleece, can, after it has settled into a comfortable resting position, flop over on its back and be unable to right itself. Because of gas accumulation when the animal is on its back flailing its legs in the air, the sheep will often die when it is cast down.

The only goat that sometimes has the same problem is the Pygmy doe in advanced pregnancy, and with her the problem is not so serious because she'll scream for help.

5) Sheep suffer in silence. If a ewe is cast down or has trouble lambing, she is likely to lie there and die. She will not cry for help. Nor will sheep yell during shearing, ear-notching or tagging or tattooing, docking, or castration. If the shepherd is not alert, he will lose the sheep in distress.

Goats, on the other hand, scream in agony at any little thing; estrus, clipping, loneliness, in addition to tattooing, castration and dehorning. They want to share their misery with anyone who listens. If a doe has trouble kidding, she screams until help comes.

A goat herder doesn't have to be particularly alert. His charges will awaken him from death with their yells.

Isaiah (53:7) said that Jesus' example was to face His persecution and prosecution "like a sheep being led to slaughter." He did not try to defend Himself verbally or physically. He did not scream for help. He trusted completely in God's plan, and that is what He expects from His followers.

The goats weren't actually sent to perdition. That's an illustration Jesus used to explain to His followers how to enter His kingdom. Human "goats" will be allowed to share the Kingdom with the human sheep when by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit they are able to 1) flock together in unity under one Shepherd, 2) follow ONLY that Shepherd, 3) respond to their Shepherd by coming when He calls, 4) rely on their Shepherd to save them from their falls, and 5) suffer persecution silently through faith in their alert and faithful Shepherd.

So when we read Matthew 25:31-46, besides obeying the admonition to serve others, we should evaluate whether we follow like sheep or wander like goats and consider how close we'll come to the Kingdom of Heaven during judgment.

Previously used as a talk at a women's conference and at Community Church of Devore.