

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Mule Sheep Sheepdog Shepherd (Isaiah 9:6)

We are going to look at a few side characters in the Christmas story and see if we might be able to learn a thing or two. If I were to ask “What would you say are some of the side elements / characters apart from Joseph, Mary and Jesus that are mentioned in the bible?”

You might mention, Shepherds, sheep, wisemen, camels, inn keeper, romans, horse, donkey, etc.

Our first character is mentioned in:

Psalm 32:8-9 (NLT)

The LORD says, “I will guide you along the best pathway for your life.

I will advise you and watch over you. (Or I will teach you and advise you and I will counsel you and keep my eye on you)

⁹Do not be like a senseless horse or mule

that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control.” (or don’t be like these animals that have no understanding).

Before we are saved, before we accept Jesus as our savior, the bible uses lots of adjectives to describe us as sinners, ...lost, blind, sick, slaves to sin, lovers of darkness, adulterous, dog that returns to its vomit. Here the bible is comparing us sinners to stubborn mules and horses. In American lingo...we might use the term jackass, which is simply, a male donkey, but when used in a derogatory way, we are trying to convey that ..the person being called this name is full of themselves, think they are always right, self-righteous, unchangeable in a negative way, stupid, etc. This is exactly what the bible is calling us when we are without Christ.

But in verse 8, David writes that God wants the best possible outcome for us, He will teach us and advise us in the way that we should go.

And how does HE do that? Uses a bit and bridle! Initially He will use the circumstances in our life to call us to Himself. And when we don’t heed His call like a stubborn mule, He raises the thermostat so to speak. The challenges keep increasing. The bridle that controls the bit, gets tighter, keeps us hard heads from moving to the left, when the rider in fact wants us to stay in the center lane going straight.

What do you think needs to happen to make life easier in this situation? Does change need to come to the rider, in our case this is almighty God or does change need to come into the mind of the animal?

Our mind has to be transformed. We need to be able to come to the end of our senses. God wants us to give up. God I cannot do this life. My situation is impossible. I am so broken Lord, please have mercy on me. Don't give me what I deserve, please show me grace. That is a prayer that moves mountains!

Psalm 51:17 A broken and repentant heart O God, you will not reject.

This is what our God wants from us. To acknowledge that His way is the Best way. Didn't He go so far as to say I AM the Way?

And what is God trying to teach us from the beginning of Genesis till the end of Revelation?

Ephesians 2:1-5

So what is God telling the world repeatedly to anyone who will listen, that we are dead because of our sins and trespasses but by grace, we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. He is our **Prince of Peace** that reconciles us to God

God will try again and again to teach us His way. But we sometimes behave like the mule that must be harnessed and dragged near because the natural tendency for the animal is to behave wild, to run away and worse, to get into trouble!

In Genesis 16:12, God gives a word to Hagar regarding her son Ishmael. "He will be a wild donkey of a man. His hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him. He will live in hostility with his brethren". Maybe that is our story today. We might be straining in a relationship. Do not lose heart. We can turn to the one who can reign us into a right relationship with Christ first then with others.

Samson was another wild donkey of a man. In this case, his relationships with women were his undoing. He had to lose BOTH his eyes, before he finally came to his senses. Despite his tragic end, he did finally figure out

how to give into God's hand and for that he is mentioned in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11.

Maybe this describes us today. We might want to do things our way and NOT the Lord's way. There is no need to have our eyes plucked out to get to our senses.

Today if you hear His voice, don't harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled. Hebrews 3:15

1. The reason why Christ came to this earth to be born in human form is so that we might be transformed by Him.

He name shall be called Wonderful and Counselor, when we listen to the Counsel of THE ONLY Counselor worth listening to, He changes our heart so that we are receptive to His call.

John 10:27-28 ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand (or away from me).

Our second animal / character from the Christmas story is the sheep. Jesus said "my sheep hear my voice" or "my sheep listen to my voice"

The mule can hear His voice too. But remember the mule's natural reaction is to run away. The sheep's natural reaction is the opposite to that of the mule. What does Jesus say about HIS sheep, these were His? They hear my voice and they follow!

God is in the transformation business. He wants to take the mule out of us and make us HIS sheep.

2 Corinthians 5:17-18

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;

The mule mind in me is dead (or at least should die daily). I am now transformed into a sheep that is able not just hear God's voice, but is also able to understand what He is telling me.

What is God's job for me now? I am now in the ministry of reconciliation. Telling others about the love of God in Christ Jesus so that they too can have a new and right relationship with Him. Can't God do this job Himself? Sure, He can, but He chooses to involve us as His hands and feet as long as we are willing and living on this earth. The only 2 qualifications for what God wants us to do is for us to be Willing to do His will and be Living to do His will.

Sheep are very different from mule.

Remember the parable of the Lost Sheep?

Every now and then sheep tend to wander off, that's when the shepherd leaves the 99 and comes after us. It's like having a mule in sheep's clothing! Having the mule tendency while being a sheep. That's a tragedy too!

But how does this happen? Sheep are not too intelligent. "Due to their strong flocking instinct and failure to act independently of one another, sheep have been universally branded "stupid." (www.sheep101.com).

In the Lost Sheep Jesus talked about the single sheep that strayed, but the emphasis there was that God loves us so much that He will not have even one of us perish.

In Isaiah 53:6, God has a whole different outlook on the wandering:

All of us, like sheep (all not 1 or 2), have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.

The question is how do sheep get to be separated from the herd to wander off or stray away? The answer is Slowly!

1 John 2:16 ¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever DOES THE WILL of God abides forever.

When I am a new believer in Christ, I am eager about everything Jesus. I am excited to see what God is going to do in my life. How He is going to change my grim situations. I pray very regularly. I read the bible every day,

eagerly waiting to hear Him speak to me. I am eagerly longing to DO HIS WILL.

But after a while, I start getting lazy about my relationship with God. I stay up late and as a result, can't get up early enough to pray or spend time in His Word before I start my day. Which in turn results in me NOT hearing what the Lord has to say about my life, which then affects the day-to-day decisions I end up making!

I find myself skipping out on even hearing from God on Sunday or fellowshiping with His people. I am SLOWLY Drifting away.

Then the things of this world start appealing more to me than the life God wants me to live! By the way, what I am sharing is my life story and this is not pointed at anyone but me! This was the story of my life from 1994 through 1998. It is a sad tale, wrapped up with the American dream life that left me eating in the pig pen! Just like in the prodigal son story, when I came to my senses, I cried out "Lord, please forgive me and get me out of this mess I have made for myself. I do not ever want to be in this situation again". God was right there with his "Rod and His Staff". The Rod (situations and circumstances) gave me a good beating, for my own good, but I humbled myself and accepted whatever punishment I had to bear at that time. The Staff (supernatural unseen) protected me from the clutches of the evil one. That's what God does when one of us go astray through the desires of our physical bodies, the desires of what our faculties tell us with our eyes and ears and we can also be led astray with the false allure of self-pride in what we can accomplish on our own strength. Maybe dear brother dear sister, that is your tale today. God is still knocking on the door of our heart, we just need to let Him in again.

Revelation 3:14-20

¹⁴ "And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. ¹⁵ "I know your WORKS: you are neither cold nor hot. I would rather that you were either cold or hot! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ I COUNSEL you to buy from me GOLD refined by fire, so that you may be RICH, and WHITE GARMENTS so that you may clothe

yourself and the SHAME of your NAKEDNESS may not be SEEN, and SALVE to anoint your EYES, so that you may see. ¹⁹ Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. ²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Who is He writing to? Not the unbelievers or the lost world....He is addressing a group of believers in Laodicea. They were busy working alright, but something is amiss. Their works were no longer acceptable to the Lord. They had to be Counselling. You don't counsel a sheep; you call out to it. God says, Counsel is for stubborn mules. What had happened, they had reverted to their old ways. They were mules in sheep clothing! Running after the Gold of this world (pride in thinking they were rich), works were shameful (lust for fleshly deeds, hence God saw their true worth, shameful nakedness without the covering of the blood of the Lamb), they did what their eyes saw right (lust of the eyes), when in reality they were blind. Having eyes but cannot see, having ears they cannot hear (Jeremiah 5:21 and Mark 8:18). But God is patient for us to return to Him, that's why He pursues us and keeps knocking on the door of our hearts. The One who is supposed to be inside has been slowly thrown outside! Perhaps that is our story today. Repent and open the door our heart to be transformed again into what He wants us to be.

All that was about the lost sheep, but what about the 99 that Jesus talked about? What did Jesus say about them?

Luke 15:4 ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country (or wilderness), and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?"

What does Jesus say he would do to the 99? Leave them where they are. Not in a safe spot, he never said, I'm going to lock them up safely and then go looking for the lost rascal sheep. does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country (or wilderness), and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?

So the question then becomes what keeps the 99, when the Shepherd is seemingly not visible?

David answers that question.

Psalm 23: 1-4

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. ³He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Previously we Jesus referring to the sheep as His Sheep. Here the “sheep” is referring to the Shepherd as My Shepherd. Is that the story of our life? Can we say that the LORD is our very own personal shepherd? Secondly, because He is our shepherd, we will not be in want. That is a difficult statement to make.

Only when my needs line up with what God wants for my life, will I be completely SATISFIED! And be able to say I have no wants that He cannot satisfy! David goes on to say that God not only supplies all his daily needs, but David even acknowledges God's hand in his day to day circumstances; the paths of righteousness. When we acknowledge and seek after Him and His will for our lives, then it will NOT matter whether we are in the wilderness, the open country or in the valley of the shadow of death. Our trust is in Him completely. That's the secret of the 99 that were left in the fields. Are we one of those 99?

Can we say “Lord thank you for all that you have done for me, are doing for me and are going to do for me”? Do we think He is Wonderful?

2. The reason why Christ came to this earth to be born in human form is so that we might be Satisfied in Him.

But God is not done with us yet. He wants us to be sheep dogs! There were no sheep dogs in Israel as dogs were considered unclean, but we in western nations and south eastern nations like Australia and New Zealand understand what a sheep dog is and its value in modern day farming.

The job of the sheep dog like border collie Lassie in a famous TV series, is to round up the sheep and keep them close to the shepherd! And the Bible clearly talks about this function within the body of believers!

Romans 15:1-2;

15 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. **11** Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Rom 15:1-2. We are supposed to be strong in the Lord....why does God give us strength...so that we can bear up the weaker ones and BUILD them up. How can we build someone up, by pointing them to the shepherd of OUR lives who gives us strength. John 15 talks about abiding in Him in order to bear fruit. So if we are already abiding in Him, there should be a longing in us to have other sheep/mule abide in Him too!

In 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, Paul is reminding believers that whatever activity we are involved in, should center or focus around giving glory to God. He goes on to say, that he wants others to imitate him as an example to follow, even as he himself is following Christ.

Sheep dog herding sheep towards the Shepherd.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18

¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.¹⁵ See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Earlier in this chapter Paul talks about the impending coming of the Lord. The great Day of the Lord like a thief in the night. Verse 9-10 encourages us that God will see us through this dreadful time of Judgment by taking us out of this world just in time (rapture us out). Verse 11 THEREFORE encourage one another with these words and BUILD one another up. But How do we do that?

Paul answered that in Verse 14 onwards:

Admonish the idle sheep, Encourage the faint hearted sheep, Help the weak sheep, Be patient with all the sheep, Don't repay stupid sheep with evil, Seek to do good to the sheep,

Rejoice always even when we have to run over stones and thorns to help sheep get to the shepherd
Pray without ceasing for the good and stubborn sheep
And finally give thanks in ALL circumstances.

To me all of these jobs points to what a sheep dog does!
And as sheep dogs, we know that even if the Shepherd has stepped away for a little bit, He WILL return. And in the mean while we need to continue doing what He has called us to do.

3. The reason why Christ came to this earth to be born in human form is so that we might be used by Him in the Kingdom building process.

But God is not yet done with our transformation process.

1 Peter 5:1-4

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the SUFFERINGS of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² SHEPHERD the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under COMPULSION (not in the flesh), but willingly, as GOD WOULD HAVE you (let God lead you); not for shameful GAIN (be selfless), but eagerly; ³ not DOMINEERING (he is thinking about his life, but now realizes that we should always be pointing others to Jesus) over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd (there are plenty of shepherds but only 1 CHIEF) appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

As shepherds, we are Spiritually mature to understand that no matter what happens on earth or how bad things get, our God is a Mighty God and is our Everlasting Father. We are in this for the long haul!

4. The reason why Christ came to this earth to be born in human form is so that we might receive the Crown of Glory.

So the question is where are we in the transformation process?

Are we a mule that hears but runs away because of a lack of understanding and acceptance of the reality of Jesus Christ, who is our **Counselor** and **Prince of Peace**?

Are we sheep, faithful in following the Lord, hearing His voice, but every once in a while the mule heart leads us astray? Is He **Wonderful** to us?

Are we completely satisfied in Him and trusting in Him so that we are the Lord's helper, working alongside Him in the Kingdom building process? Do we understand that He is a **Mighty God** and our **Everlasting Father**?

God has great plans for our lives. He wants us to receive the crown of glory. Wont you trust Him with all of your life today?