Jesus's Compassionate Urgency for Evangelism and Missions: Veterinary Medicine Informs Understanding Matthew 9:36

Richard W. Penn

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, July 2025

Abstract

Bible scholars can sometimes gain useful insights from scholars in other realms of knowledge. This article presents that that is the case with respect to a common health problem of sheep. Grasping this matter opens a new vista on the great urgency of evangelism and missions.

Key Words: compassion, downcast, sheep, shepherds

Introduction

One of the longest and most significant NT missions texts, Matthew 10, is introduced by 9:35–38. Unfortunately, translations inadequately render a key term in verse 36: "When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and *helpless* [ἐρριμμένοι; my italics], like sheep without a shepherd." (NIV is used unless otherwise noted.)

Setting

The only parallel is Mark 6:34: "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things." Matthew adds to Mark "harassed [ἐσκυλμένοι] and helpless" and uses this verse quite differently.

These parallel verses have distinctly different contexts. The preceding material in Matthew 9:18–34 is on healings but in Mark it is on Christ's sending out the Twelve (6:7–13), the death of John the Baptist (6:14–29), and what immediately preceded Jesus feeding the 5000 (6:30–33). While Matthew 9:36's pericope leads into the Twelve's mission in chapter 10, Mark 6:34 helps lead instead into Jesus teaching the crowds and then feeding the 5000 (6:35–44).

While Luke 9:1–6 is an abbreviated parallel to Matthew 10, Luke has no similar introduction, like Matthew 9:35–38.

Matthew 5:1 and 9:36 begin identically in Greek and so bracket Christ's words (Matt 5–7) and miracles (Matt 8–9) (Boring 1995, 252), which prepare the way for his disciples' mission.

Shepherds in Scripture

God is the shepherd of his people or sheep in the OT (Gen 48:15; 49:24; Ps 23:1–4; 28:9; 74:1; 77:20; 78:52-53; 79:13; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3; Isa 40:11; Jer 23:1–4; 31:10; Ezk 34:5f, 11f, 16–22; Mic 2:12; 7:14; Zc 9:16; 10:3). Jesus has this role in the NT (Matt 2:6; 15:24; 18:10–14; 26:31; John 10; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4; Rev 7:17). Israel had good and bad human shepherds. Good ones, like Moses, Joshua, and David, are types of the perfect NT shepherd—Christ. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison (1991, 248) note on Matthew:

> Probably implicit in 9:36 is the notion that Israel is waiting for her true shepherd, Messiah Jesus. The evangelist has already asserted, on the basis of OT texts, that the Messiah will "shepherd" Israel (2:6), and there is some evidence that "shepherd" carried messianic

connotations in Judaism (Jer 3:15; 23:4; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24; *Pss. Sol*. 17:40; *Midr. Ps*. on 29:1).

Davies and Allison suggest that Jesus may assume a Mosaic office in seeking out Israel's lost sheep.

Moses prayed concerning his successor—Israel's next human shepherd—and God answered:

"May the LORD, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd." So the LORD said to Moses, "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him" (Num 27:16–18).

Andreas J. Köstenberger (2014, 34) writes:

David, the shepherd-king, served as the prototype of God-honoring shepherd leadership (2 Sam. 5:2; Ps. 78:70–72; Jer. 23:3–6; Ezek. 34:23–24), while other leaders, who fed and served only themselves, are described as bad shepherds (Isa. 56:11; Jer. 10:21; 23:1–2; 50:6–7; Ezek. 34:1–31; Zech. 10:2–3; 11:15–17). Old Testament prophetic expectations concerning God's future rescue of his people from poor human shepherds (Jer. 23:3–6; Ezek. 34:23–24; cf. Jer. 3:15) lay the foundation for our study of shepherding in the Gospels. In the future, "An anticipated shepherd ruler (Mosaic and/or Davidic) would lead his renewed community in a second exodus, provide for God's flock in their exilic wilderness, and renew his covenant with them there."

Köstenberger (2014, 47) adds on the inappropriate chapter break after John 9:

Notably, there is no real transition from the account of Jesus's healing of the blind man in John 9 to his presentation of himself as the Door and the Good Shepherd in John 10. This lack of transition indicates that the audience is likely the same and that the thieves and robbers of John 10 are meant to describe the Pharisees who had just expelled the healed blind man from the synagogue (John 9:34). John 10 thus includes a strong polemic as the passage contrasts Jesus the Good Shepherd of God's flock with the current Jewish leadership which is shown to be part of the trajectory of bad shepherds throughout Old Testament history who served and nurtured only themselves and, shockingly, fed on the sheep rather than caring for them (John 10:1, 5, 8, 10, 12; cf. Isa. 56:11; Jer. 10:21; 23:1–2; 50:6–7; Ezek. 34:1–31; Zech. 10:2–3; 11:15–17).

In contrast to salvation history's evil, exploiting shepherds, Jesus is the *Good* Shepherd because he sacrificed himself for his sheep (John 10:11–18) (Köstenberger 2014, 49).

When Israel's shepherds—kings and religious leaders—were completely self-serving, negligent, and corrupt exploiters of Israel, the OT often called the distressed Israelites scattered, shepherdless sheep (1 Kgs 22:17; 2 Chr 18:16; Jer 10:21; 13:20; 23:1–4; 50:6-7; Ezek 34:1–16; Zech 10:2–3; 11:15–17; cf. Num 27:16–17; Jer 12:10; see Jdt 11:19). Similarly, Nahum's last two verses (3:18–19) conclude with God's coming judgment of Nineveh and Assyria: "King of Assyria, your shepherds slumber; your nobles lie down to rest. Your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them. Nothing can heal you; your wound is fatal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?"

Jesus builds on these well-known OT texts stingingly to indict the Jewish religious leaders for disastrously misleading, abandoning, and dooming their followers to spiritual death (cf. Matt 15:14; 23). Chrysostom (2023) expounded on Matthew 9:36's preceding context:

> This is His charge against the rulers of the Jews, that being shepherds they acted the part of wolves. For so far from amending the multitude, they even marred their progress. For instance, when they [the crowds] were marveling and saying, "It was never so seen in Israel [v33]": these [the Pharisees] were affirming the contrary, "He casts out devils through the prince of the devils [v34]."

The Jews' utterly corrupt leaders departed 180 degrees from God's calling to feed and protect the sheep; instead they devoured God's people (Witherington 2006, 207).

The Sheep's Plight

Jesus himself most graphically portrays the hopelessness of people without him, even Jews, God's chosen people. Let us consider English translations of the perfect passive participial verb forms in 9:36 of σκύλλω and ῥίπτω. After covering scholars' views on these words, we will consider various 9:36 translations of this phrase.

First, on *σκύλλω*: The NT only uses it three other times—the NIV translates these three participial uses as "bother" (Mark 5:35 // Luke 8:49) or "trouble" (Luke 7:6). W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann (1971: 114) note that its participle "ranges very widely indeed, from being flayed, to being concerned, vexed, bewildered, despondent." Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine (1988, 288) observe that its root "originally meant 'flayed' or 'skinned'. In the New Testament, however, it always has a figurative meaning: 'troubled,' 'harassed,' 'worried,' or 'bewildered,' or possibly 'confused' or 'upset'." John Nolland (2005, 407) explains that it is "used metaphorically of harassment of any kind, and then (in the passive) of the exhausted or troubled state produced by such harassment." Bauer writes on its root ἐκλύω, "In our literature only in the passive with active sense: **be exhausted in strength**, *become weary, give out* (…) [Emphasis in Bauer's *Lexicon*, which cites numerous references.] from hunger (…) Matthew 15:32; Mark 8:3." (Bauer's *Lexicon*, which cites multiple references. Mounce renders the root in Gal 6:9 "give up;" Heb 12:3, 5 "lose heart.")

Second, on *ῥίπτω*: Louw and Nida (1988, 320) write, "Most find here a 'figurative extension of meaning of ῥίπτω "to throw," … to be or become dejected, with a possible implication of loss of hope.'" Nolland (2005, 407) says, "It is used in a wide range of derivative senses, but not normally with overtones of violence. It is perhaps best to think of sheep lying passively on the ground, with no sense of what to do in their need: they lack the protective and guiding role of a shepherd." Albright and Mann (1971) note it literally meant "'prostrate,' either from drunkenness or from a mortal wound." Newman and Stine (1988, 288) add that it originally meant "throw away (or, down)" but Matthew obviously uses it figuratively. Davies and Allison (1991, 147) write that while the participle "means, literally, 'lying on the ground' … here it must mean something like 'helpless'. Perhaps 'cast down' is the best equivalent. Do the passives imply a subject (the political and religious leaders)?"

Now, translations. The 1977 NASB has: "Seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion on them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd." But the 1995 NASB

unfortunately changed "downcast" to the much less accurate "dispirited" but with its margin adding: "Lit. *thrown down*." The 2020 NASB reverted to: "Seeing the crowds, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd." (The Legacy Standard Bible is identical but omits the last comma.) The Disciples' Literal NT text has "thrown-forth" with the margin reading: "That is, scattered. Or, thrown down, as wounded or helpless." (The idea of being "thrown (down)" is in Matt. 27:5; Luke 4:35; 17:2; Acts 27:19, 29.) The conservative Lutherans' Evangelical Heritage Version has: "When he saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were troubled and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd."

Other versions less adequately render ῥίπτω as: "helpless" (NIV, ESV, ISV, NET, CEV, GNT, NRSV, BSB); "dejected" (Barclay, CSB, Goodspeed, LEB, Mounce, NJB); "scattered (abroad)" (KJV, ASV, ERV, MEV); "cast away" (Berean Literal, Darby); "cast aside" (LSV); "abandoned" (NAB); "worn out" (HCSB); "lying (here and there)" (DRA, Haweis NT); and "fainting on the ground" (Weymouth).

Werner Bieder (1977, 992) notes that this term compares "the house of Israel … to sheep lying on the ground with no shepherd." Donald A. Hagner (1993, 260) tentatively proposes translating it as "confused." Commentator R. T. France (2007, 371) says that it might suggest "sheep lying listlessly around with no shepherd to get them moving." He cites other scholars who have proposed that the sheep were "beaten down" (U. Luz) or "oppressed, downtrodden, beat-up, and crushed" (W. Carter).

Veterinary Medicine Insight

Significantly, these above scholars in the realm of Bible knowledge do not note any impediments to inputs from the realm of veterinary knowledge, and in fact some of their comments indicate a certain openness to new insight from sheep experts. Fortunately these two independent fields of study converge and collaborate to yield a significantly improved grasp of Matthew 9:36.

In verse 36 ῥίπτω is technical, shepherding jargon, which has greatly hindered adequate translation. (None of its six other NT uses refers to sheep: Matt 15:30; 27:5; Luke 4:35; 17:2; Acts 27:19–20.) The modern shepherd W. Phillip Keller (2007, 70) sheds light:

- Only those intimately acquainted with sheep and their habits understand the significance of a "cast" sheep or a "cast down" sheep.
- This is an old English shepherd's term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up again by itself.
- A cast sheep is a very pathetic sight. Lying on its back, its feet in the air, it flays away frantically struggling to stand up, without success. Sometimes it will bleat a little for help, but generally it lies there lashing about in frightened frustration.
- If the owner does not arrive on the scene within a reasonably short time, the sheep will die.

Sheep are exceptionally dependent on their shepherd for guidance, food, water, and protection from other sheep, thieves, flies, parasites, diseases, and predators, which globally include coyotes, wild dogs, foxes, wolves, mountain lions, bobcats, bears, and eagles. Sheep require the most meticulous attention and care of any livestock and easily get lost.

While shepherdless sheep will already soon die, Jesus intensifies their predicament's immediacy. A "downcast" sheep has lain in a comfortable ground depression and rolled over on its back to stretch out and relax. But as its center of gravity shifts, it may be unable to re-stand. Then it may panic, pathetically struggle, and frantically flay away with its feet. The blood supply to its legs is cut by gas building up in its rumen (its largest of four stomachs) (Keller 2007, 72).

A "Cast" Sheep (Dickinson 2023)

Susan Schoenian (2021), who earned her B.S. and M.S. in animal science and is a Sheep and Goat Specialist at the University of Maryland's Western Maryland Research and Education Center, explains: A mature sheep's rumen is a huge 5–10 gallon capacity stomach—a fermentation vat with billions of microorganisms—including protozoa and bacteria, which enable it to digest fibrous food, such as grass, better than non-ruminant animals can. Rumen fermentation makes huge amounts of gas that belching eliminates. Blocked belching causes a deadly emergency and may cause a condition called bloat.

Veterinarian David C. Henderson (1990, 409) says of such a downcast or bloated sheep, "The pressure of the swollen rumen presses on the diaphragm, causing difficulty in breathing and finally suffocation and heart failure."

Purdue University Extension sheep and ruminant nutrition specialist Mike Neary (1997) writes:

> Bloat can be a sudden and lethal occurrence for sheep. Often, unless the livestock is being monitored closely, the first symptom one notices is dead or distressed animals…. Treat bloated sheep with care. The build-up of pressure in the rumen can actually cause a partial collapse of the lungs. Furthermore, blood from the body is forced out of the body cavity to the extremities and can cause a form of acidosis. Thus, stressing these animals complicates the situation.

According to Keller, death can take up to days in ideal, cool, wet weather, but a predator or scorching sun can kill such a suffering, helpless, immobile sheep quickly (cf. Ezek 34:5, 8, 28)

(Keller 2007, 72). Rocky Lindsey, Associate Professor of Animal Science at the U. of Arkansas at Monticello, DVM from LSU, who has served with and is currently associated with the Christian Veterinary Mission and who has experience raising sheep (Lindsey 2024), concurs that bloated sheep will rapidly die unless rescued, which would have been common knowledge among shepherds then. A responsible, compassionate shepherd, upon finding such a pathetic sheep, runs to its emergency rescue.

A Cast and Bloated Sheep (Dickinson 2023)

How should this shepherding jargon be translated? While no English, one-word translation suffices, the best single word is probably the still inadequate "downcast," but it requires explanation, like a margin note. Otherwise it might be seen as indicating that the sheep were dejected, depressed, and discouraged—looking downward. It would be better to use a short phrase, like "helplessly stuck on their backs dying quickly." A study Bible should explain more and include a picture.

Christ's Compassion

God's and Christ's concern for their sheep is a theme in Matthew (2:6; 10:6–8; 12:11–12; 15:24; 18:10–14; 25:31–46; 26:31–32). Matthew uses "sheep" by far the most in the Synoptics (14x; Mark–2x; Luke–4x), especially with soteriological and eschatologlical emphasis. (John 10 has the NT's most concentrated usage.)

R. T. France (2007, 373) notes that "compassion"—σπλαγχνίζομαι (Matt 9:36)—is "strongly emotional" and "speaks of a warm, compassionate response to need. No single English term does justice to it: compassion, pity, sympathy, and fellow feeling all convey part of it, but 'his heart went out' perhaps represents more fully the emotional force of the underlying metaphor of a 'gut response'."

George A. Buttrick (1951, 360-361) observes:

> The word translated compassion is actually a much stronger word: it implies pain of love. They were as if wolves had harried them and left them bleeding, because they had none to lead and protect them. What a commentary on the state of a nation!
>
> What an indictment of Roman power and of Jewish religion! The latter, when it should have been both solace and strength, imposed a spiritual tax to compare with the Roman money tax.

Commentator William Barclay (2001, 354) calls it Greek's "strongest word for pity" and notes that, apart from three uses in parables (Matt 18:33; Luke 10:33; 15:20), it is always used of Jesus (Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 9:22; Luke 7:13). Barclay (1974, 278-279) adds that it had vastly more significance than that Jesus was deeply moved by people's troubles:

> The notable thing about this word is that to a Greek its use about anyone who was divine would seem completely and utterly and totally incredible.
>
> According to the Stoics, and they were the highest thinkers of the age, the supreme and essential characteristic of God is *apatheia*. By *apatheia* they did not mean apathy, in the sense of indifference. They meant *incapability of feeling*. They argued in this way. If a man can feel either sorrow or joy, it means that someone else can bring sorrow or joy to him. That is to say, it means that someone else can affect him, can alter his feelings, can make him happy or sad, it means that that person has power over him, and is therefore, for the moment at least, greater than he. If God could feel sorrow or joy at anything that happens to man, it would mean that man can affect God, that man has that much power over God; but it is impossible that anyone should have any power over God, for no one can be greater than God; therefore God can have no feeling, he must be essentially without feeling; he must be, in the technical sense of the word, by nature *apathetic*. The Greeks believed in a God who could not feel. [Emphases original.]

Thus Plato believed that God was incapable of hearing people's prayers or having any pity, and Plutarch believed similarly (Barclay 1974, 279; See: Plato, *De Deo Socratis* 6.132; Plutarch, *De Defectu Oraculorum* 9.414-15.). Barclay (1974, 280) concludes:

> Pagan religious thought believed in a God whose essence was that he was incapable of feeling pity; pagan ethics taught that the aim of life was a life from which all pity and all compassion were totally and finally banished. The idea of a God who could be moved with compassion, and of a life whose motive force was pitying love, must have come to such a world literally like a new revelation.

Matthew *always* uses this term to express "not only sympathy with a person's need, but also a practical response which meets that need; emotion results in caring and effective action" (France 2007, 373). These compassionate actions are: Christ healing the sick in a crowd (14:14); Christ miraculously feeding hungry crowds (15:32 // Mark 8:2); a king (representing God) forgiving an impossibly big debt (Matt 18:27); and Christ giving two blind men sight (20:34). The Synoptics also used it elsewhere of his compassion on: a leper (Mark 1:41), the father and his epileptic son (9:22), and the widow at Nain, burying her only son (Lk 7:13).

As true love for Jesus shows itself in our obeying his commands (John 14:15, 21, 23–24; 15:10), true Christian compassion must trigger our loving action—service, not our short circuiting into a perhaps emotional but selfish, passive failure to help.

Robert H. Smith (1989, 144) notes on the Matthew 9:36–37 transition:

> Suddenly Jesus switches from a pastoral to an agricultural figure of speech. *Harvest* symbolizes ripeness, fullness of time, and also judgment (3:12; 13:30, 39; John 4:35; Rev. 14:15; cf. Isa. 27:12; Jer. 51:33; Hos. 6:11; Joel 3:13; 4 Ezra [2 Esdras] 4:28–32). It is high time to gather the *harvest* (cf. catching fish, 4:18–22; [13:47–50;] gathering the sheep and separating them from the goats, 25:31–46).

Matthew also has the harvest motif in 6:26; 20:1–16; 21:34; 25:24, 26.

As in Matthew 9:36, Christ stresses the urgency of his disciples' mission in verse 37: "Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few'." That is, crops or converts could be lost for lack of harvesters bringing them in during their short window of opportunity.

Conclusion

Christ in Matthew 9:36 characterizes multitudes without him as terminal: only quick emergency help could save them. He paints a pathetic picture that no shepherd had ever seen nor thought possible: a vast number of quickly perishing sheep. Their Jewish religious leaders—shepherds—had not just abandoned them but as vicious predators had turned on and betrayed them.

Facing lost humanity, Christ implores prayer for his vital harvesters—evangelists (Matt 9:37–10:42 cf. Ezek 33:7–9; Rom 10:9–15)—whom he was then sending to reach quickly dying lost multitudes. His activated compassion, urgency, prayer, teaching, miracles, sending, and miraculous empowerment (10:1, 8) fully supported his disciples' evangelistic and missions outreach to the lost flocks.

Properly understanding 9:36–37 reveals that it is the Bible's premier text on Christ's surpassing urgency for evangelism and missions. Such a realization will impel and encourage us who are Jesus's followers to accelerate the fulfillment of his Great Commission.

References

Albright, W. F. & Mann, C. S. (1971). *The Anchor Bible: Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Barclay, William (1974). *New Testament Words*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

_____ (2001). *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1 (rev. ed.). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Bieder, Werner (1977) "ῥίπτω," in G. W. Bromiley, G. Friedrich, & G. Kittel (Eds.). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 6. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 991-993.

Boring, M. Eugene (1995). *The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections* in *New Interpreter's Bible.* Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Buttrick, George A. (1951). *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Vol. 7 in *The Interpreter's Bible.* NYC: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press.

Chrysostom (2023). Homily 32 on Matthew. New Advent, ed., Kevin Knight. Trans. by George Prevost and rev. by M. B. Riddle. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 10. Ed. by Philip Schaff. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888. https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/200132.htm

Davies, W. D. & Allison, Jr., Dale C. (1991). *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. 2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Dickinson, B. (2023). 'Upside-down' sheep could be dying - here's what you can do to help. (Images: Farmers Against Misinformation.) *DevonLive*. February 27. https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/upside-down-sheep-could-dying-8192384

France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Hagner, Donald A. (1993). *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13.* Dallas: Word Books.

Henderson, David C. (1990). *The Veterinary Book for Sheep Farmers.* Sheffield, England: Farming. Cited in Laurie Ball-Gisch (2021). Prevent Sheep Bloat by Managing Your Herd: Bloat in Sheep Can Be Deadly. Countryside. https://www.iamcountryside.com/sheep/prevent-sheep-bloat/.

Keller, W. Phillip (2007). *A Shepherd Looks at the Twenty-Third Psalm.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Köstenberger, Andreas J. (2014). "Shepherds and Shepherding in the Gospels," in B. L. Merkle & T. R. Schreiner (Eds.). *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond.* Grand Rapids: Kregel.

Lindsey, Rocky (2024). Personal communication, January 18.

Louw, Johannes P. & Nida, Eugene A. (Eds.) (1988). *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Domains*. New York: United Bible Societies. https://archive.org/details/greekenglishlexi0001unse/page/320/mode/1up?view=theater

Neary, Mike. (1997). Preventing Pasture Bloat in Sheep. *The Working Border Collie*, Jan/Feb. https://ag.purdue.edu/department/ansc/sheep/_docs/preventing_pasture_bloat.pdf

Newman, Barclay M. & Stine, Philip C. (1988). *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew.* NYC: United Bible Societies.

Nolland, John (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Schoenian, Susan (2021). Let's Ruminate on it. Sheep 101. https://www.sheep101.info/cud.html

Smith, R. H. (1989). *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew.* Minneapolis: Augsburg.

Witherington III, Ben (2006). *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Matthew.* Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing.