

“I Am the Good Shepherd” | John 10

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When Queen Elizabeth was a young girl, she worshipped at a small Scottish chapel on Sundays when the royal family summered at Balmoral Castle in Scotland. They used the Old Scott Hymnal the hymn, and there she first learned the hymn, “The Lord’s My Sheperd, I’ll Not Want.” It made an impact, for she chose it for her wedding in Westminster Abbey in 1947, and it was sung there again when she was laid to rest in 2022.

The Lord as our Shepherd is one of the most familiar and loved images from Scripture. It brings to mind a picture of God gently and confidently leading us, his sheep. It settles our fears and secures our confidence. And it is the image before us as we come another of Jesus’ “I Am” statements in John.

Seven times in John’s Gospel Jesus opens a statement with the words, “I Am,” then adds a metaphor or image. I am the Bread of Life. I am the Light of the World. I am the Door. These images tell us both *who* Jesus is, and *what he does* for us.

They also address our deepest needs. To the hungry, Jesus says, “I am the bread” (Jn 6:35). To those in darkness, “I am the light” (Jn 8:12). To those who feel trapped, shut out, he says, “I am the Door” (Jn 10:7, 9).

Today we are again in John 10, where Jesus twice says, “I am the Good Shepherd” (Jn 10:11, 14).

This is the most personal of the images so far. If Bread spoke to inward nourishment, Light to our need for understanding, the Door of access to God—the image of a Shepherd is about a *person drawing near to us*. A person both caring and strong, utterly devoted to leading us to green pasture. The Good Shepherd says to those who feel lost, unsure or afraid, God is with you, carrying out perfect leadership over your life.

As this passage shows that good shepherding involves three actions of the Good Shepherd: **(1) He Calls; (2) He Leads; (3) He Protects.**

We will consider these in turn, but as we do, I also want to make clear a particular feel, or tone, in his shepherding that shows up in each. It is that in his shepherding, Jesus can hold together the seemingly opposites qualities of being *tough* and *tender*. He is *gentle* and *inviting*, *tender* with his sheep. But he is also *fiercely powerful* and authoritative. With the same hands he can bind up the wounds of a lamb and break the jaw of a wolf. He is a Shepherd-King, a Shepherd Warrior. Thus he *calls*, *leads* and *protects*—in tenderness and toughness. Sheep need both.

I. The Shepherd Calls

In the broad context of John 10, Jesus is gathering his flock. He has sheep that will come out of the Jewish fold and Gentiles fold, and, verse 16, “there will be one flock, one shepherd” (10:16).

How he gathers his sheep begins with his voice—he *calls them*.

The sheep **hear** his **voice**, and he **calls** his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his **voice** (10:3-4).

Kenneth Bailey was an academic and author who taught for forty years in the Middle East. In his book, *The Good Shepherd*, he reflects on what he learned from actual shepherds in that area. Sheep have poor eyesight but very good hearing. They become distinctly familiar with their shepherd's voice. One student explained to Bailey that an unfamiliar or new voice can cause for a sheep "a temporary nervous breakdown...until that sheep re-trains its ear to recognizes the voice of the new shepherd."¹

Shepherds in Jesus' day may have had flocks of up to 100 sheep and knew their them well.² Bailey writes that "a modern shepherd could lead [his] sheep through a valley walking slowly in front of them giving his ten-second call roughly every 40 seconds."³

This is the first feature of Jesus as the Good Shepherd to notice: *he calls his sheep, and they recognize his voice.*

He was calling his sheep back then, and he is calling his sheep today—right now. Perhaps that is where you are at today, you are beginning to hear your Shepherds calling.

His call is tender and inviting, but also strong and authoritative.

A Tender Call: It is tender in that it is so personal. Notice he calls the sheep *by name*: "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep **by name**" (Jn 10:3).

Naming points to familiarity and affection. One Shepherd shared in his book, *My Shepherd Life in Galilee*, names he gave his sheep: "Split Ear, Short Tail, Bright Eye, Angel, Black Spot, and Lazy."⁴

When grazing in the countryside, Shepherds spent all day and night with their sheep—often without another human to converse with. A bond developed between man and animal.⁵

The Good Shepherd is gathering a great flock—the universal church, gathered from every tribe and tongue—, but each sheep is personally known. He calls them by name. The same way you, as a parent, look for your own child amid a crowd, and call them by their unique name—so to, as Jesus goes about the world, he spots his own sheep and calls them by name.

¹ Kenneth Bailey, *The Good Shepherd*, 215.

² E.g., "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, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4).

³ Craig Keener, *John*, 806.

⁴ Stephen A. Haboush, *My shepherd life in Galilee, with an exegesis of the Twenty-Third Psalm*, (Chicago: Merchandise Mart, 1949, 16; cited in Bailey, 217).

⁵ In the parable Nathan tells king David in 2 Samuel 12, he speaks of "a poor man who had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him" (2 Sam 12:3). We think also of Jesus' parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15, where a shepherd leaves the 99 to go look for just one.

A Tough Call: But the Good Shepherds call is not merely tender. It is not *only* an invitation; it is also a *command*. It is the call of our *owner*, as verses 3-4 make clear:

he calls his **own** sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out **all his own**, he goes before them (Jn 10:3-4).

In the Biblical world, shepherds did not merely recall tender care; they also recalled the rule of kings. Kings were likened to shepherds because they were sovereign and ruled.⁶ The shepherds call is personal and tender, but it is also authoritative.

We might think of two points of application as we consider the Shepherd's call.

First, parents, are you helping your children hear the voice of the Shepherd? Their first access to it will be through you—reading Scripture with them, praying with them, bringing them to church. They are hearing voices constantly—think about what voices sound loudest in their young ears.

Second, are we Christians listening only the tender words of Jesus—such as “come to me all who are weary, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:20), or here, “I came that you may have life abundantly” (John 10:10)? Or, are we willing to hear his tough love too: “go, and sin no more” (Jn 8:11); “take up your cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24). The voice of the Shepherd is not only a tender invitation; it is also the King's command. Jesus says, “why do you call me Lord, Lord, and *not do what I say*” (Lk 6:46).

The culture of our churches, small groups, discipleship, parenting, must carefully sound both the gentle and strong voice of the Shepherd.

So this is our first point—to be shepherded by the Good Shepherd, is to hear his Word calling you.

[T] Along with calling, the shepherd leads—bringing us to our second observation.

II. The Shepherd Leads

After God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them through the Red Sea, we are told in Psalm 77, “You led your people like a flock, by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (Ps 70:20). Shepherds call the sheep together in order **to lead** them.

He calls his own sheep by name and **leads** them out. (Jn 10:3).

Coming under Jesus leadership, knowing he guides your life, is one of the most comforting features of this image.

Tender Leading: And notice that his leadership is tender: it is in no way indifferent to each Sheep's ultimate welfare: the Shepherd comes, verse 10, so they “may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). The Good Shepherd connects the dots between your unique needs and what will be required to achieve abundant life for you.

⁶ “As rulers of sheep, shepherds provided a natural image, in metaphorical contexts, for rulers, this was true in both Hellenistic and Jewish contexts” (Craig Keener, *John*, 800).

He also is not driving them from behind, but leading from Infront, the first to encounter danger: verse 4, “he goes before them” (Jn 10:4).

Jesus always leads by going before. Hebrews says he is the “pioneer of our salvation” (Heb 2:10 NIV), meaning, he faces death before we have to, so by his resurrection we can be assured of our future.

In his leading of the Sheep, the Good Shepherd shows a tender awareness of their desire for “abundant life,” and graciously shows the way by going before them.

Tough Leading: But this does not mean his leadership is only tender and only easy. He does not guarantee freedom from all trials. His leading can be through the “valley of the shadow of death” (Ps 23:4). And if we truly would follow him, his leadership will take us through the fires of testing and sanctification.

Recall the Patriarch Joseph. In some of his last words he speaks tenderly of “the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day” (Gen 48:15). Jacob’s entire life, according to him, was lived under the careful leadership of the Lord. But was his life easy? He knew strife, deception, division among his own sons, the apparent death of a beloved son, years of famine and fear. And now, he is nearing death in the foreign land of Egypt.

And yet, he has seen the faithfulness of God in reuniting his sons. Jacob understands, with the eyes of faith, that every detail of his life has someone, mysteriously, unfolded according to the leadership of “the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day” (Gen 48:15).

When Jesus promises us “abundant life” in this passage (10:10), we sheep can often forget that this promise of joy requires our transformation. Just like a parent may know that their child’s ultimate happiness will require them to first mature in many ways, so too, in leading us to happiness, Jesus intentionally brings us into experiences of testing and formation. It is simply His way of leading sheep. He is tender with us—but he is also tough, aiming at nothing short of our holiness.

But his leadership should ultimately give us tremendous confidence. Because it means that our lives are not ultimately cast upon the fortunes of our own leadership.

Leadership has become a multi-billion-dollar industry today: books, seminars, coaching and academic programs. We are all leaders now.

But far more important is that Scripture paints a picture where a man must be led before he can lead. Abraham, Moses, David, the Apostles, are nothing if they are not first followers—people under the leadership of the Lord. And how could it be any other way? We mere mortals don’t know where, ultimately, we are supposed to go, nor do we have the wisdom to know which steps or decisions are always best.

Have you not looked back at your younger self and wonder what he or she was thinking. How much more so will our heavenly selves look back at our earthly selves and grimace at how little wisdom we often have.

When you are under the leadership of Jesus, there will be times you don't understand what's going on or are being beaten to a pulp by what is going on. But you can have this assurance:

we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).

The confidence of the sheep lies not in his ability to perfectly obey or understand God's will; rather, his confidence lies in the Shepherd's ability to lead His sheep where he so desires—in the right timing, the right way, for the right reasons.

[T] Thus far we see that as the Good Shepherd, Jesus calls and leads his sheep, and with a tenderness and toughness. Finally, we see in this passage that he also protects—and to his own hurt.

III. The Shepherd Protects

There are many dangers facing these sheep: The “thieves and robbers” who come “only to steal, kill and destroy” (Jn 10:10).⁷ There is the danger of wild animals, “the wolf comes and snatches the sheep” in verse 12. Then there is the danger of hired-hands, workers who because they don't own the sheep but are only paid by the hour, won't risk their skin in defending them:

He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep (Jn 10:12-13).

The Good Shepherd protects the sheep from these dangers—and at great cost. Four times in this short passage we read that the Good Shepherd “Lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11, 15, 17, 18).

This, of course, foreshadows Jesus' death on the cross. And the real thieves and wolves he must face are threefold: Satan, Sin and Death. A leader who can't protect us from these isn't worth getting up on Sunday morning for.

Jesus goes out from the fold and fights Satan, Sin and Death. It is as though in the process of killing the wolves, one grabs Jesus' neck and kills him. But as Jesus dies, they all receive a mortal blow. And Jesus, because he is God, has power not only to lay down his life, but to take it up:

No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. (Jn 10:17-18).

The toughness in the shepherd is obvious here. Just as David as a Shepherd went out and fought “a lion, or a bear”⁸ so too Jesus has no fear when it comes to defending his sheep. Nothing scares a man who has authority to lay down and take up his own life.

⁷ At night it was easy to climb into a sheepfold and snatch a sheep. Robbers would then kill it and eat it—or perhaps sell the meat.

⁸ Recall David's words to Saul: “Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him” (1 Samuel 17:34-35).

But I want us to feel the tenderness. And we feel it, when we recognize that no one in the ancient world would think the life of a shepherd was worth losing for the sake of some sheep. But Jesus “lays down his life for them.”

The hired hand won’t protect the sheep, Jesus says, because he “cares nothing for the sheep” (Jn 10:13). Therefore, Jesus’ protection—at the cost of his life—can mean only one thing: his care for them is enormous.

The Good Shepherd is Good, because he saw worth in us because while we were seemingly worthless. Stepped in sin, paying no honor to God, fading away in our mortality, this was our plight when the Almighty came to rescue.

There are many echoes of the Gospel in **Victor Hugo’s novel, *Les Misérables***. One often underappreciated is in the relationship between the freed and newly wealthy Jean Valjean, and a helpless and forlorn little girl, Cosette.

Since his release from prison, Valjean has risen in wealth and rank, and his now mayor—a man at the top of society.

Cosette, meanwhile, is born at the bottom. Her mother is a poor prostitute, and she is given away to a cruel couple, the Thénardiens, who instead of caring for her, abuse her.

Valjean learns of her situation, but a man of his rank could not easily engage a prostitute’s daughter. In disguise, Valjean brokers a deal with Thénardier to take Cosette into his care—at that time she is only 8 years old.

On the morning he comes for her she is presented in rags. But he’s brought her a dress and woolen stockings and shoes. The little girl scarcely knows what’s happening, but senses she is being rescued and led out of this hell—and by someone good.

As the sun rises that morning, Hugo writes that the people of that town

“saw a poorly clad man go along the Rue de Paris hand-in-hand with a little girl...who was carrying a large doll.... No one knew the man, and since she was no longer in rags a good many did not recognize Cosette.... All [Cosette] knew was that she was leaving the Thénardiens’ house for good. She left that place both hated and hating, a small, gentle creature in whom every natural instinct until that moment has been suppressed. She walked gravely, gazing wide-eyed at the sky...now and then...looking up at the man beside her. She had a queer feeling, as though she had drawn close to God.”⁹

Such is the way of the Good Shepherd with his sheep. He sees us even when we are just children, even when we are enshrouded in sin and without hope. And he is *moved*. Why? Because we are his. His Sheep. He knows us. He knows the number of hairs on our head. And he has determined in his great love to rescue and protect us from all eternal harm:

⁹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 378-79.

But God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

And the Son came—the Good Shepherd. He saw us before we saw him. He called us by name. He gently won us away from the darkness of the world. And he did this at great cost to himself.

I close with two pleas to all sheep.

Will you listen for his voice? You will end up following someone's voice—but will you listen for His! He is the only Good Shepherd. Do you know how to distinguish his voice from others? These sheep did: "A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (Jn 10:5). A sheep must become increasingly familiar with Jesus' voice. Be in his word. Sing songs saturated with his word. Pray his word. Ask Him to start speaking to you. What does it sound like, you ask? It is never less than or out of tune with His Word written. And when it comes, it is as the "spiritual quickening voice of Christ heard first by the soul." It rouses the conscience; it awakens desire for something more; it slowly nurtures an interest than affection for this Good Shepherd—as *my Shepherd*.

And second, please stay close to His Flock. The physical manifestation of Jesus' flock is a healthy local church: Peter later describes a local church as "the flock of God": I exhort the elders among you....² shepherd the flock of God that is among you (1 Peter 5:1-2).

In the local church you will find sheep who have been following the Shepherd for a long time—they have a knack for staying close to him, for recognizing his voice and even understanding his ways. Stay close to them, and you'll stay close to the Good Shepherd.

Let's pray.

Small Group Questions for John 10:1-18, "I Am the Good Shepherd."

1. Twice in this passage, Jesus refers to himself as "the Good Shepherd" (Jn 10:11, 14). What images come to mind when you think of a shepherd? How does the image of Jesus as a shepherd strike you?
2. Jesus says his sheep "know his voice" (Jn 10:3-4). How have you heard the Shepherd's voice in your own life? In verse 5 we read, "A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." How can Christians today distinguish between the voice of Jesus and the voice of strangers?
3. The Good Shepherd also leads us. How has Jesus' leadership in your life sometimes felt *tender*—leading you to "green pastures"? And how has it sometimes felt *tough*—leading you through testing or difficulty? Have you seen his goodness in both?
4. Jesus says the Good Shepherd *lays down his life for the sheep* (John 10:11). What difference does it make to you that Jesus protects us not only amid temporary troubles but ultimately from sin, Satan, and death?
5. Peter likens the local church to the "flock of God" and its pastors to "shepherds" (1 Peter 5:1-2). How has being part of a church helped you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd?

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and follow Him? Who are some sheep (other Christians) that by staying close to have helped you stay close to the Shepherd.

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