

The Voice of the Good Shepherd

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As a Montana rancher for most of my 70 years, I treasure the parable of the good shepherd, found in John 10:1–18, for I have lived it. The following experiences were particularly powerful in bringing this parable to life.

In biblical times each shepherd vocally summoned his personal flock from the many herds pooled together into a nighttime sheepfold (see vv. 3–4). Likewise, whenever I move my sheep, I simply call, and they follow.

Years ago my spry 96-year-old neighbor, Alice, who also raised sheep, became ill during lambing season, so I offered to do her night lambing. When I entered her lambing shed my first night “on duty,” Alice’s nearly 100 ewes were peacefully bedded down for the night. Yet when I appeared, they immediately sensed a stranger in their midst. Terrified, they instantly sought safety by huddling together in a far corner (see v. 5).

This continued for several nights. No matter how quietly I entered, the sheep panicked and fled. I spoke soothingly to the newborn lambs and ewes as I tended them. By the fifth night they no longer stirred as I worked among them. They had come to recognize my voice and trust me.

Sometime later I told Alice I would feed her dozen or so bum lambs their bottles. (A bum lamb is one whose mother has died or cannot produce enough milk.) Imitating Alice, I called to her lambs, “Come, BaBa! Come, BaBa!” I expected the lambs to hungrily stampede me as they did her. But not a single lamb even glanced up. Alice then stepped out her kitchen door and called. Hearing *her* voice, they eagerly rushed toward her, clamoring for their milk.

Intrigued, Alice and I conducted an experiment. Standing in my corral, Alice mimicked *my* call: “Here,

lamby, lamby! Here, lamby, lamby!” and received no response whatsoever. But when *I* called with the exact same words, my sheep quickly surrounded me. Even though the *words* we used to summon the sheep were identical, our unfamiliar *voices* went unheeded. The sheep loyally heard only their true shepherd (see v. 4).

John 10 distinguishes a *shepherd* from a *shepherd*. A shepherd, whose sheep are his own, has loving concern for their safety. In contrast, a *shepherd* is merely the “hireling” and “careth not” (v. 13). The parable also teaches that while the hireling flees and deserts his sheep (see v. 12), the shepherd willingly lays down his life for his sheep (see v. 11). This is certainly true of our Good Shepherd—our Savior, Jesus Christ—who lovingly gave His life for us (see vv. 15, 17–18).

To me these experiences confirmed one of the critical messages of the parable: striving to personally know our Good Shepherd and to readily recognize His voice will prevent our mistakenly following the hireling. By faithfully heeding the voice of our Good Shepherd—and none other—we will be guided to eternal safety. ■

