

It Is the Shepherd, Not the Sheep, Who Is Smart

Think about it for a minute. Have you ever seen sheep perform in a show?

We've seen trained elephants and trained lions and tigers and trained dogs. But trained sheep? I don't think so. Does anyone teach their sheep to sit or roll over or fetch or play dead?

To be sure, one website claims that, "Despite the popular belief that sheep are stupid, they are actually incredibly intelligent. They have very impressive cognitive ability and just like humans, they form deep and lasting bonds with each other, they stick up for one another in fights and they grieve when they lose a friend. They experience all of the same emotions that we do including fear, joy, boredom, anger and happiness to name a few."

The site also notes that, "In addition to being incredibly smart, they also have wonderful memories! They can remember approximately 50 individuals (sheep and human) for years at a time."

So, sheep are "incredibly intelligent" and "incredibly smart"? Could it be that there's a little pro-sheep hyperbole here?

More realistically, another site notes that, "A sheep is about as intelligent as a cow or other farm animals that [do not have] complex survival skills but can still navigate their surroundings using cognition." (Did you ever hear a proud parent say, "My child is as smart as a cow!")

Most importantly, the site continued, "Sheep are not intelligent animals like wolves or dolphins. This is because they are overly reliant on shepherds for protection after millennia of domestication."

And that's what this article is about: sheep know the voice of their shepherd. That's how they survive. They are not simply "overly reliant" on shepherds. They are entirely reliant.

They cannot kill a predator with their vicious bite and massive teeth, neither of which they have. They cannot tear a predator apart with their sharp claws, which they also do not have. But their shepherd can keep them from danger. He can defend them. And he can lead them to green pastures.

All they have to do is follow his voice. Their ears are trained to recognize (and ignore) the voice of an impostor.

As Jesus said, "Anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice" (John 10:1-5).

But Jesus was not just talking about sheep and their shepherd. He was talking about His own flock and about Himself, the Shepherd of that flock.

He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know My sheep and My sheep know Me—just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father—and I lay down My life for the sheep" (John 10:11-15).

What a Shepherd! No wonder that He is not only called the Good

Shepherd but the Great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20).

Very often in prayer, when faced with a challenging situation, I will remind the Lord, "I'm just a dumb sheep. I don't know anything. You're the Shepherd! Speak to me and I will follow. I'm Your sheep and I hear Your voice. So speak, Lord, and I'll joyfully obey. I just need You to show me the way."

In the same spirit, when faced with tremendous pressure in the midst of a ministry endeavor, be it financial pressure or the need for wisdom or for impossible doors to open, I will throw all of it back on the Lord: "This was Your idea, Lord, not mine! This is Your work! This is about Your name! This is about Your plan! This is for Your glory! You are the Author and the Finisher of my faith. The power and the wisdom and the riches are all Yours. So I'm asking You to back Your work. This is about You, not me."

Even if the Lord has given you a tremendous gift, be it a gift of healing or prophecy, or a gift of singing or songwriting, or a gift of wisdom or counseling, or a gift of preaching or teaching, it's His gift, not yours.

As Leonard Ravenhill pointed out in a sermon I heard in 1983, Samson was not some massive, towering, hulk of a man whom God blessed with a little added strength. To the contrary, the Philistines were constantly trying to figure out what the secret of his strength was (see Judges 16). Had he been a 7-foot-tall giant with arms of steel and legs like tree trunks, there would have been no mystery at all. For all that we know, he might have been 5-feet-tall, skinny and weighing 100 lbs. when soaking wet. How does *he* do *that*?

That's why Paul wrote to the Corinthians, who were greatly impressed by outward appearance and looked for superstar leaders, "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered

it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Cor. 3:5-7); And this: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7).

All of which brings me back to the fact that we are just dumb sheep—meaning, dumb compared to the wisdom and knowledge of God and compared to the challenges we face in this world, despite the wisdom we gain by experience and the knowledge we gain through the Word.

For me, that brings tremendous comfort. I don't have to know every detail of the future. I don't need to be aware of all the devil's plans for the next 50 years. I don't need to know which pasture will be next when we're out of green grass here. I just need to stay close to the Shepherd and respond to His voice.

He has everything under control. He will protect us from the predators. And He will lead us into green pastures and cause us to lie down beside still waters (see Psalm 23).

Knowing the Shepherd and following His voice, we are secure. Totally. All our boast is in Him! {eoa}

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