

11 May 2025



John 10 v 22-30

One Spring afternoon in the lanes near Denbury I observed a huge herd of sheep being moved from one field to another. The farmer was not in view but had left his pickup vehicle with his eager and faithful border collie dog excitedly looking out of the front window. From my view point it looked as if the dog was driving the vehicle and herding the sheep around! It made me think how far removed our understanding of ancient farming practices is from what we are familiar with in the 21st century, even if some of live in the countryside. Our perception of bible passages such as this from John's gospel tends to be infused with our modern understanding, and as a result the real meaning can be lost.

In biblical times a shepherd would live in the fields with his flock, caring for them personally and knowing each individually. At night a shepherd would lie down across the gap in the sheepfold to deter predators. The shepherd provided food and protection for the sheep and as a result they would follow him, rather than being herded forcefully by dogs. We should also be reminded that sheep were extremely valuable to the shepherd. How valuable and precious is each of us to God, that he pursues us even when we wander off from his paths.

Sheep are often depicted as stupid, but this is rather unfair as recent research has proved they can problem solve and are almost as intelligent as pigs! One interesting feature is that sheep recognise other sheep and this also stretches to humans – being able to pick out someone they know from a photograph. This ability goes hand in hand with recognising the voice of someone they trust and who has their best interests at heart - the good shepherd and not simply an uninterested hired caretaker. As Christians we can trust Jesus as our caring shepherd.

Listening to God lies at the centre of our relationship with him. Prayer is meant to be a dialogue not a monologue; spiritual listening is a discipline we all need to cultivate. Like us, the pharisees in this passage were fond of their own voices and as a result were drowning out the voice of God. Jesus reached out to them with his truthful bold claim of being 'one with the Father' and the offer of being part of his family, protected eternally. Are we drowning out God's voice in our lives?

We hear many voices every day – the external chatter of others around us including through the TV and social media, often with false news, false narratives and ungodly, shallow content. Who we pay attention to and whose voice we seek out says a lot about ourselves. Internal voices of self-doubt and inadequacy sometimes ring around our head but spiritual listening to God provides us with eternal truth and assurance of his love and care.

'Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen'
Hebrews 13 v 20-21