

The green grass spreads as far as you can see. Trees pop up from time to time to offer shade. There's no need for a fence when all the land is yours. Trails crisscross the property, but they're not roads. They're the beaten paths animals make. Wild animals roam looking for something to eat. They find it among the flock of sheep also inhabiting this particular piece of land. The sheep don't stand a chance against their enemies. They're much too slow and much too indecisive to elude the hunters. Their only shot is the shepherd who oversees them.

Shepherds hardly ever roamed America. Our idea of shepherds comes from children's books and movies, but even there we understand very little. We're familiar with buildings, toll roads, and property lines marked by six foot wooden fences. We hardly face the task of keeping any animals safe from predators except taking care of a dog, cat, or some other small pet. We especially might have a hard time channeling this shepherd picture into our spiritual life. In what ways would we need a shepherd for our spiritual life, much less a Good Shepherd?

As we look at Jesus' story in John's gospel we find that even though we might not understand everything about the picture we can find things to learn and appreciate about it. Even in a time like this with concrete jungles and computer technology there's still something soothing about the fact that...

**We have a multi-talented shepherd
He stands watch over us
He serves as the gate for us**

Certain parking lots around the city require tickets to enter received from someone in a booth. In other lots it's a person waiting in a booth when the car leaves where you stop to pay. That person watches over that parking lot to ensure no one goes in or out without paying. In first century Judea the parking lot was for sheep. A shepherd would bring his flock to the sheep pen. One gate in meant one watchman was needed. The watchman was responsible for making sure no one got in or out that wasn't authorized. Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber."** Entering by the gate meant passing the watchman. Anyone who didn't pass the watchman had bad intentions. True shepherds of the sheep always passed the watchman because they had nothing to hide.

There are plenty of enemies out there that would like nothing more than to get their hands on one of you sheep. They pile over the fence, avoiding the gate where the watchman waits. They pile in among the sheep with their half truths and good looks. They're probably not immediately recognizable by the sheep. They talk of prosperity saying God wants you to be rich. They come in through the television saying God has shared with them when the end of the world is and they can tell you. We let them in the door and they ask if we're serious about believing in death and resurrection. They talk smoothly saying we should avoid talk of sin. You'll have a happy church and more members.

Our multi-talented shepherd is the watchman over his flock. He stands guard at the gate making sure the only people moving among the sheep are true shepherds. The watchman trusts these shepherds because he knows their intentions. **"The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."** Having the Good Shepherd in charge of the watching ensures that nothing slips past his watch. Nothing that might harm us as sheep gets in.

God gave sheep an amazing ability to distinguish voices, one from another. When the watchman let in the true shepherd he did so with the confidence that the shepherd was only going to leave with his sheep because his sheep would follow his voice. **"The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice."** It was clear to the watchman that shepherd belonged because the sheep would never follow a voice they didn't recognize. No imposters made it past the watchman.

He who stands watch over us knows what voice we need to listen for. The voice the disciples on the Road to Emmaus listened for. The voice Mary listened for and heard Easter Sunday morning. The voice you hear repeated throughout the Scriptures. The voice is your true Good Shepherd. It's the voice of the one who **"bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."** The Good Shepherd calls each of you by name. The one who died for all sins knows you personally. This Good Shepherd died and lives now so he might call you by name to follow him.

When sheep wander away is when they get into trouble. A sheep outside the sheep pen is especially in danger because they're out from under the protecting and watching eyes of the watchman. We need to stay under the watchful eyes of our multi-talented shepherd who watches over us. We need to listen for the one voice that calls us out of the darkness and into the safety of his protection. Remaining in the Word keeps us inside the fence of his watching. Listening and obeying his call keeps us under his watching. Spiritual survival means always being led by our Good Shepherd and watchman.

The idea behind a multi-tool is that everything you need is in one handy tool. If you need a wrench, a screwdriver, a toothpick or tweezers, they're all there. Same with our multi-talented shepherd. Not only can he provide the eyes that are necessary to watch over the sheep as the watchman but this shepherd watchman does something else. He is the gate for the sheep as well.

We know Jesus isn't talking about a swinging gate rusting on the hinges. The gate was the only way in and out of the pen. It provided the security and differentiated between those that belonged and didn't. Only those who belonged among the sheep got through the gate. Jesus puts it pretty clearly, **"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture."** The gate is really a beautiful picture of Jesus as the only way to be saved and get to heaven. Jesus as gate is the only place to find true security to move about freely and to be provided for. No thief or robber is getting past the gate when that gate is Jesus, the multi-talented shepherd.

To many the thought of having only one gate, saying that there is only one way into heaven seems a little exclusive, intolerant. How could a God so big have only one way? There has to be many roads that lead to heaven. More paths would save a lot more people; which is what God wants. False teachers don't advertise that they're leading someone to death down a path other than Jesus. But that's reality. Any other road can't possibly give life.

Exclusivity and intolerance are what you want though if you're a sheep. That's because the one gate is pretty exclusive and pretty intolerant of any other way to heaven. It's because Christ's interests are in you the sheep. He wants you to be saved. He wants you to live eternally. He lives to give you life. The comparison between the thief and the shepherd gate is clear. The thief only wants to destroy. The gate lives to protect the sheep so that they may live. The gate allows the sheep in and out to find all the good spiritual stuff that grow faith and gives life.

So sheep it's time for training. Concentrate on the gate, learn what makes it special, and why we should believe in the gate called Jesus. Become so well trained as sheep that you never fall for deceptions. Know the Word. Read it at home. Study it at church. Ponder it at work. Be found in the Scriptures so that your faith might grow and your knowledge of the gate might also be strengthened. Continue to have contact with your under-shepherds here on earth, pastor and teachers. They use the gate to the sheep because they love the Good Shepherd and they love the sheep. They want to see the sheep strengthened and saved. They know the only place that happens is through the gate, through Jesus.

A watchman, a gate, these are pictures for Christ. They also separate. Both keep some out and others in. Christ desires that all be inside and safe from the terrors of Satan and sin which cause suffering outside. And he welcomes inside those that are his. Those that hear the gospel call and trust it. Those that hear of a Savior who rose from the dead and trust it. They're inside the sheep pen where the watchman watches and the gate keeps out thieves and robbers. Inside the sheep pen are believers like us who know our Good Shepherd who says, **"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."**