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Hard Texts for a Harder Age
Booklet Three

Can a Chatbot Shepherd You?

Trusting the Voice That Knows Your Name

Text: John 10:1–15 (with Hebrews 13:17; 2 Timothy 4:3–4)
Please read with an open Bible.

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FREE PREVIEW — FIRST 13 PAGES

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A Note on This Preview

What follows are the first thirteen pages of this booklet: the complete Sunday sermon manuscript and the opening portion of the Wednesday companion Bible study, through the keyword study and commentary insights. The full booklet continues from there with the remaining cross-references, the theological themes, and both sets of discussion questions with sample answers.

A Note from the Author

I write as a minister with 57 years in gospel ministry, an elder, and a board-certified chaplain. Artificial intelligence is new to my generation but the temptation behind it is not – the temptation to trade a shepherd who knows you for a voice that simply agrees with you. Every research finding cited in this booklet was independently re-verified against its original source before publication. My aim is not to frighten anyone away from a keyboard, but to point every reader back to the Good Shepherd. – Dr. John W. Edmerson, DMin

Sermon

Text: John 10:1-15 (with Hebrews 13:17; 2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Big Idea: A shepherd who knows your name and gives account for your soul will always outlast an algorithm that only knows your question.

Introduction

There is a question circling church-house kitchens and Wednesday night classes right now that our grandparents never had to ask: can a machine shepherd your soul? You can open an app on your phone this morning, type in your worst fear, your deepest doubt, your 2 a.m. question about whether God still loves you – and in three seconds, something answers back. It sounds wise. It sounds calm. It never gets tired of you. And a growing number of people, especially the young, are starting to wonder if that voice can do what the preacher does.

Jesus settled this question two thousand years before the first computer chip was built. In John chapter 10, He does not warn us about technology – He gives us a picture of what real shepherding looks like, so that when the counterfeits come, whatever form they take, we will know the difference. He says, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep' (John 10:11, NKJV). Watch this, church – He does not say 'I am a good source of information.' He says 'shepherd.' That word carries blood, presence, and a name spoken over your life.

This morning I want to show you three things from this text. First, the Shepherd knows the sheep by name. Second, the hired hand has no skin in the game. Third, itching ears will always have options – but sound doctrine still stands. Turn with me to John 10.

I. The Shepherd Knows the Sheep by Name (John 10:3-4, 14)

Interpretation

Jesus says, 'To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice' (John 10:3-4, NKJV). And again, 'I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own' (v. 14, NKJV). The Greek word behind 'know' here is *ginosko* – not a word for filed information, but a word for relational, experiential knowledge. It is the knowing of a covenant, not the knowing of a database.

A chatbot can process your words. It can pattern-match your question against a mountain of text and hand you back something that sounds pastoral. But it does not know you. It has no memory of the funeral you preached last spring, no sense of the particular temptation that has chased you since you were seventeen, no awareness that you have already asked this same question four different ways because you are still not ready to hear the answer. The Shepherd knows the sheep. He calls each one by name.

Illustration

I think of the country shepherds of Bible lands – not hired men passing through, but men who lived with the flock season after season, who could tell you which ewe limped, which lamb was skittish, which one had wandered off twice before. They didn't need a spreadsheet. They had walked every hill with those sheep. That's a picture of a real shepherd – an elder who has sat at your kitchen table, a preacher who has stood with your family at the graveside, a Bible class teacher who noticed you stopped coming and called to ask why. Somebody ought to say amen – that kind of knowing cannot be typed into existence.

Application

Church, don't mistake information for intimacy. It is right to use every tool God gives us – including, at times, technology – to study the Word. But when your soul is genuinely troubled, don't settle for a voice that only knows your question. Seek out a shepherd who will come to know your name, your history, and your walk. That relationship is slower to build and worth every bit of the time it takes.

II. The Hired Hand Has No Skin in the Game (John 10:12-13; Hebrews 13:17)

Interpretation

'But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep' (John 10:12-13, NKJV). The hired hand has no covenant with the flock – when trouble comes, he has no reason to stay. Hebrews 13:17 gives us the positive counterpart: 'Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account' (NKJV). Real spiritual authority is authority that will answer to God for how it led you.

Illustration

Every congregation I have served has had faithful shepherds who lost sleep over souls – elders who drove across town at midnight because a family called in crisis, preachers who wept in the pulpit over a wayward child that wasn't even their own. That is what it looks like to give an account. Now ask yourself: who gives an account for the advice an algorithm hands out at 2 a.m.? No one. There is no elder behind the screen who will stand before God and answer for what was said to you in your lowest moment. That ought to sober every one of us.

Application

This is not a call to suspicion of every tool; it is a call to know the difference between a resource and a shepherd. Use whatever helps you study the Word more carefully. But when it is time to make a decision that will shape your marriage, your walk with the Lord, or your soul's eternal destiny, put yourself under counsel that has skin in the game – counsel that will answer to God for what it told you.

III. Itching Ears Will Always Have Options -- But Sound Doctrine Still Stands (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Interpretation

Paul warned Timothy, 'For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables' (2 Timothy 4:3-4, NKJV). Notice – Paul is not describing a twenty-first-century problem. He is describing the human heart in the first century. The itch to hear something more comfortable than the truth did not begin with technology; it began in Eden. Every generation heaps up teachers who will tell it what it wants to hear. AI simply removes the friction – no waiting, no accountability, no awkward eye contact – from a temptation that has always been there.

Illustration

I have watched church members shop from preacher to preacher until they found one who would bless what they had already decided to do. That is an old sin wearing new clothes. The difference today is speed – instead of driving across town to find an agreeable voice, a person can now type a question five different ways until an algorithm produces the answer they were hoping for all along. Watch this: the danger was never really the machine. The danger has always been the itch.

Application

The remedy Paul gives Timothy in the very next verse is the remedy for us: 'But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry' (2 Timothy 4:5, NKJV). Preach the whole counsel of God, in season and out. Teach your people to test every voice – human or artificial – against the Word, not the other way around.

Conclusion & Invitation

So can a chatbot shepherd you? It can hand you a verse. It can even hand you good information. But it cannot lay down its life for you, it cannot give an account for your soul, and it cannot call you by name the way the Good Shepherd does. Jesus said, 'My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me' (John 10:27, NKJV). That is a relationship, not a query.

If you have never obeyed the gospel of this Good Shepherd – if you have never heard His voice, believed on His name, repented of your sin, confessed Him before others, and been baptized for the remission of your sins – I invite you this morning to come. And if you are a wandering sheep who has drifted from the fold, the door is still open; the Shepherd is still calling your name. Won't you come while we stand and while we sing?

Bible Study — Companion Lesson

Please read with an open Bible as you work through this study.

1. Passage Context

John 10:1-15 falls immediately after the healing of the man born blind in John 9, where the Pharisees – who claimed to see – were shown to be spiritually blind, while the healed beggar came to see and worship Jesus. Chapter 10 continues that same confrontation. Jesus contrasts Himself, the Good Shepherd, with the Pharisees, who have functioned as false shepherds, more concerned with control than with the sheep. The 'I am' statement ('I am the good shepherd,' v. 11) is one of seven such statements in John's Gospel, each revealing Jesus' identity through an everyday image His hearers understood instantly. Hebrews 13:17 was written to Jewish Christians under pressure to abandon the faith, reminding them that their leaders would give account for their souls. 2 Timothy 4:3-4 is part of Paul's final charge to Timothy, written near the end of Paul's life, warning that a day was coming – already present in some measure – when the church would prefer comfortable teachers over sound ones.

2. Historical and Cultural Background

In first-century Palestine, sheep from several flocks were often penned together overnight in a communal fold with one door, guarded by a doorkeeper. In the morning, each shepherd would call his own sheep, and only his sheep would recognize his particular voice and follow him out, even though the flocks had been mixed all night. This was common knowledge to Jesus' hearers – shepherds who owned the flock lived with the sheep year-round, while hired hands worked only for wages and had no long-term stake in the flock's safety. When a wolf

appeared, the difference between an owner and a hireling became immediately obvious.

3. Keyword Study

1. poimen (ποιμήν) — G4166 — "shepherd"

Used throughout the Septuagint and New Testament for both literal shepherds and for God, and later Christ, as shepherd of His people (Psalm 23:1; Ezekiel 34:11-16; 1 Peter 2:25). The term carries covenant weight – a shepherd's identity is bound up with the flock's welfare.

Why it matters: Jesus deliberately claims the title Israel had reserved for God Himself (Ezekiel 34), a direct claim to deity that His hearers would not have missed.

2. ginosko (γινώσκω) — G1097 — "to know, in the sense of relational and experiential knowledge"

Distinguished from mere intellectual knowledge (oida); ginosko describes knowledge gained through relationship and presence over time, the same word used of the intimate knowledge between the Father and the Son in John 10:15.

Why it matters: This is the exact quality an algorithm cannot possess – relational knowledge built through covenant presence, not data retrieval.

3. misthotos (μισθωτός) — G3411 — "hired hand, hireling"

A wage-earner with no ownership stake in the flock; used only here and in Mark 1:20 in the Gospels. The word itself implies a transactional, not covenantal, relationship.

Why it matters: Names precisely what any counsel without accountability becomes – present when convenient, absent when the cost of staying rises.

4. agrypneo (ἀγρυπνέω) — G69 — "to be sleepless, to keep watch, to be vigilant"

Used in Hebrews 13:17 of church leaders who watch for souls as those who must give account; the word pictures a sentinel refusing sleep to guard what is entrusted to him.

Why it matters: Grounds the doctrine of pastoral accountability in an image of costly, wakeful care – the opposite of passive information retrieval.

4. Commentary Insights

- Coffman notes that the imagery of the sheepfold and the single door reflects a scene every hearer in Jesus' original audience would have recognized on sight, making the spiritual application immediate rather than abstract.
- Lenski observes that the repetition of 'I am the door' and 'I am the good shepherd' functions as a double claim – Jesus is both the only legitimate access to the flock and the only one who will lay down His life for it.
- Robertson's Word Pictures highlights that 'know' in verse 14 is used of a mutual, reciprocal knowledge between Christ and His own, mirroring the knowledge shared between the Father and the Son – an unprecedented claim of intimacy between the Shepherd and the sheep.
- Wayne Jackson notes that Paul's warning in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 assumes teachers will always be available to tell people what they want to hear; the danger was never a shortage of voices but an excess of comfortable ones.

5. Cross-References and Parallel Passages

- Psalm 23:1-4 — The Lord as personal shepherd, walking with the sheep through the valley, not merely informing them of it.

- Ezekiel 34:11-16 — God indicts the false shepherds of Israel and promises to shepherd His flock Himself – the background Jesus draws on in John 10.

THIS PREVIEW ENDS HERE

The complete booklet continues with:

- Four more cross-references and parallel passages
- Five theological themes
- Six thinking prompts with sample answers
- Five application discussion questions with sample answers

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