

# ARC

*ADVANCE READER COPY*

Welcome to the field. By downloading this Advance Reader Copy, you're joining a growing movement of leaders who believe presence, endurance, and care still matter.

This preview—Prologue and Chapter One—is your first step into the pasture where *Shepherd* was written. My hope is that it strengthens your resolve to lead from the inside out, with integrity that outlasts the spotlight.

Thanks for reading early and helping spread the word. I'll keep you posted as launch day approaches!

—Scott Allen Johnson

SHEPHERD

Shepherd: Becoming a Leader Worth Following

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# SHEPHERD

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Becoming A Leader Worth Following

Scott Allen Johnson



*THE CORBAN COLLECTIVE*

To my lovely Lady May,  
*who continually rescues me from myself.*



To Wyatt and Emory,  
*“I have no greater joy than to hear that my  
children are walking in the truth.” -- 3 John 4 (NIV)*

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*Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.*

*-- Dorothy, The Wizard of Oz (1939)*



## Prologue

**O**n May 17, 1900, Lyman Frank Baum published his landmark novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Most Americans know Dorothy well, the young Kansas farm girl swept into a world of Technicolor marvels. Baum's story was more than enthralling; it was prophetic. Dorothy's abrupt change of scenery would become analogous to the lives of many twentieth-century Americans. The hundred years following the publication of *Oz* proved to be an epic whirlwind of technological discovery and societal transformation.

Consider my great-grandfather, Murray Calhoun Johnson, a twentieth-century farmer with a front-row seat to unimaginable change. He was three when the Wright brothers first took flight in 1903. He was eight when Henry Ford's first Model T rolled off the assembly line. By his twenty-seventh birthday, there were fifteen million Fords on the road. He was forty-seven when three physicists developed the first solid-state transistor at Bell Labs. He witnessed the first television broadcast, the first rocket launch, the moon landing, and the birth of the personal computer. He died in 1994, the same year the Internet began finding its way into American homes. All of it—from flight and industry to technology and the dawn of the digital world—came to life before his eyes as the twentieth century unfolded.



*Murray Calhoun Johnson, my great-grandfather,  
was a witness to a century of change, steady through it all.*

I have vivid memories of my great-grandpa in his nineties, sitting in one of the numerous rocking chairs that lined his wrap-around porch. He was content to be idle, moving only when nature called or the shade shifted. He would sit, contemplating silently as the world passed by. As a restless and rambunctious kid, I could not comprehend such stillness. One day, I asked him, “Pop, do you ever get tired of just sitting here all day?” He looked at me, spat in his spittoon, and said, “No, son, these are the shortest days of my life.” I didn’t understand it then, but I do now. He was watching, from his front porch, as the world passed him by.

I often think about that now. My great-grandfather saw the world move from horse-drawn plows to space travel, and I sometimes wonder what he would make of the world today. America has long since transitioned from a pre-modern society into modernity and now into

postmodernity. Each shift has carried both blessings and consequences. Some days I marvel at the latest technology. On other days I close my eyes and long for a simpler time. Such is the rhythm of life.

I'm not here to argue whether change is good or bad. I'm more interested in what it leaves behind. During the twentieth century, most Americans moved away from their rural roots and into an era shaped by urbanization and technology. Because of that shift, my generation and those that follow have grown distant from the land and the truths it carries about life and leadership.

In a world increasingly dependent on technology, it is easy to forget that the foundational principles of leadership have not changed. The tools we use and the environments we navigate may look different, but the essence remains the same. Leadership is still about guiding people, protecting them from harm, and ensuring they have what they need to thrive, just as a shepherd leads a flock. The methods evolve, but the heart of leadership remains steady.

Today's leaders face new challenges: rapid innovation, generational differences, and cultural shifts. But the wisdom forged in the pastures of agrarian life and preserved through biblical teaching still holds true. Just as a shepherd provides safety and direction for his flock, leaders today must create stability amid uncertainty. It matters not whether you are leading in a professional setting, serving in a pastoral role, or simply walking beside a friend through life; the human need for security, guidance, and care never changes. Leadership grounded in these timeless truths not only endures, but brings life to those who follow. That is why I wrote this book.

A noticeable chasm exists between modern society and two essential sources of wisdom. The first is the hard-won knowledge of agriculture,

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born from necessity and refined through generations of experience. The second is the wisdom found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly within the biblical texts which are deeply rooted in a pre-modern, agrarian world. This book seeks to bridge the gap between our post-modern age and those timeless truths.

My goal with this book is simple: to present twelve time-tested leadership principles from an agricultural perspective, specifically through the lens of a shepherd. Each lesson draws from both firsthand experience and biblical wisdom.

For the past twenty-five years, I have served as a pastor and leader in a variety of settings, including rural churches, college campuses, new church plants, and a multi-campus ministry that now reaches across our region. I entered full-time ministry in 2000 and have spent every year since walking with people through the seasons of faith, family, and leadership. Along the way, I founded and now direct The Corban Collective, a nonprofit discipleship organization committed to helping men grow through challenge and community. Those years of leading, learning, and serving have shaped how I view the work of a shepherd, guiding people through landscapes both familiar and unknown.

Yet long before ministry, I was shaped by another kind of field.

I am incredibly blessed to have grown up with a foot in two worlds: farming and modern enterprise. In the first decade of my life, I was “employed” by the family business, where I worked with tobacco, corn, soybeans, and cattle. When people jokingly ask, “Were you raised in a barn?” the honest answer is yes. It was hot, harrowing, and honest work. Summers in the American South, especially in the tobacco fields, were adversity made real.

But by my tenth birthday, everything changed. The markets were shifting, production costs were rising, and two years of low crop yields sealed our fate. Like many farmers in the late 1980s, my family lost everything. Our house was sold at a public auction to pay our debts. My parents, newly homeless, had to find work elsewhere. Farming, once a generational way of life, had become, at least for us, economically unsustainable.

This misfortune was not just my family's story. It was the story of many childhood friends and neighbors who witnessed the dramatic shift from agricultural life to the technological age. In a real way, both the economy and the ground shifted beneath our feet.

After high school, life pulled me away from the rhythms of rural living. I traded open fields for crowded streets, navigating the high-rise hustle of cities like Raleigh, North Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia. But the concrete and commotion never felt like home. I often look back on those years of urban exile, searching for belonging in a world that moved too fast and felt too disconnected. After two decades of life and ministry, I found my way back to the place that grounded me.

In 2016, my wife, Amanda, and I made the decision to move back to the family farm. I was in the middle of a career transition, unsure of what was next, but we knew one thing for sure: we needed rest and a reset. Life had felt too hurried, too disconnected, and we longed for something steadier, something rooted. In returning to the farm, we were returning to something ancient within ourselves.

For the next eight years, we raised our children in the same fields and pastures that had shaped me, balancing the rhythms of farm life with our professional callings, Amanda in education, me in discipleship and church leadership. During those years, we began raising sheep and goats alongside my parents, learning the discipline and quiet demands

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of tending livestock. Yet the land itself became our most excellent teacher.

Mending fences, watching newborn lambs take their first steps, and learning the patience required of a shepherd were invaluable experiences. Though farming was never our primary livelihood, the lessons it offered were far more valuable than a paycheck.

In June 2024, we left the farm, but the years we spent there remain deeply rooted in us. The lessons of the pasture—patience, provision, and guidance—continue to shape how I lead.

I write this book from the intersection of my two roles, shepherd of people and shepherd of livestock. Drawing from twenty-five years of pastoral leadership and my experience tending sheep, my goal is to pass along what I have learned, offering insights on leadership from both the field and the flock.

So, without further delay, here are twelve leadership lessons designed to help you lead and serve those within your scope of influence.

Be equipped. Be encouraged. Be empowered. And lead well. Your flock is depending on you.

# If Leaders Lead, The Followers Will Follow

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## THE TASK:

Provide out-front leadership to  
the leaders within the flock

## THE WISDOM:

If you can lead a few (natural) leaders,  
the rest will (naturally) follow.



PSALM 23, NIV

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,*

*he leads me beside quiet waters,*

*he refreshes my soul.*

*He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,*

*I will fear no evil, for you are with me;*

*your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

*You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days  
of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*



## THE SHEPHERD'S DILEMMA

**F**irst light traces the horizon. Dew glistens on the grass as the morning air hangs low and daybreak begins her song. A young shepherd leans heavily on his trusted staff as he rises, stretching a back made stiff from his earthen bed. His thumb brushes absentmindedly across a single carving near the handle, a doorway-shaped mark, simple yet personal, cut into the grain long ago. He wipes the sleep from his eyes and begins to count. It is no easy task as the woolly mass ducks their heads and jostles about. Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. Thirty. All here.

Lifting his eyes, he scans the eastern sky above the Judean hills. He gathers his clues from the pinkish hue and wagers a guess in lieu of a modern forecast. It is time to make a move.

He gathers his bundle, adjusts his gear, and takes a deliberate step forward. The flock takes notice. Two sheep break first, then a handful more. Slowly, one by one, the rest ensue. After fifty paces, he pauses, allowing the stragglers to catch up, still nibbling at stray blades of grass.

To the untrained eye, it looks as if thirty sheep are following our shepherd. But look closer. The whole flock is not watching him. Instead, they are watching a few: the older ewe who always moves first, the ram who carries himself like he owns the pasture, the bold lambs full of restless energy.

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The rest? They are following those leaders.

The shepherd knows this truth and plays it to his advantage. He does not have to pull every sheep by the wool. He keeps his eye on the influencers, the ones he has named, the few who set the tone for the rest. If they trust him, the flock will too.

But here lies the dilemma: sheep do not like leaving what is familiar. The flock would rather stay in the field they know than risk what lies over the ridge. Comfort is their instinct. So when the shepherd knows it is time to move, because the grass here will not last forever, he faces resistance.

The question is this: how do you lead sheep out of comfort, when their nature is to stay put?

## THE SHEPHERD'S SOLUTION

A wise shepherd knows that fear may move sheep for a moment, but only trust keeps them following. You can drive cattle and horses, but you must lead sheep. When great leaders provide out-front guidance to the influencers within the flock, the rest will follow. Sheep survive not by strength or speed but by instinct. With no body armor, sharp teeth, or sprinting legs, their safety rests on two primal patterns: dominance hierarchy and flocking.

### **Dominance Hierarchy**

Every flock has its pecking order: those that eat first, mate first, and move first, while the rest fall in line. (The pecking order is not just reserved for the chicken coop.) Within every herd, a few emerge as the

alphas, the ones the others watch and follow instinctively. You do not need to be a shepherd long to see it; it shows itself quickly.

I learned this the hard way one afternoon in the pasture when an alpha ram decided I was in his space, his territory. I was kneeling down, mending a fence, unusually unaware of his whereabouts. So focused on the repair, I lost track of his position. The ram quietly circled behind me and blindsided me with 250 pounds of brute force. The hit sent me rolling into the woven wire, where I was pinned. I won't lie; it was brutal. I could have taken it personally and scolded the animal, but he was only doing what territorial creatures do—trying to establish his dominance. Thankfully, my father was nearby to pull him off and give me a chance to stand again. Sheep, like all undomesticated animals, are more inclined to survival than civility.

And it's not just the rams. Ewes have their own hierarchy. Some lead, others follow. Alpha females muscle their way to resources and position while the rest wait their turn. It may look less violent than among the rams, but it is no less real. Humans mirror this. Men often assert dominance through brute force, while women, just as effectively, wield influence through reputation and exclusion. (Have you ever watched *Mean Girls*?) Like it or not, dominance hierarchy is a survival tactic. And when survival is at stake, the contest for control can turn fierce. Leave two rams alone in mating season, and it should come as no surprise when the stronger tramples the weaker.

## **Flocking**

The second instinct is just as powerful. Sheep instinctively stick together in the face of danger or opportunity. Once one moves, the rest follow almost blindly. Safety is in numbers. An isolated sheep is a dead sheep. You do not have to be the fastest. Only not the slowest.

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Flocking can preserve life, but it can also destroy it. Consider the infamous case in Turkey in 2005: one sheep tried to leap a 15-meter ravine, and 400 others blindly followed. All plunged to their deaths. The first sheep made a fatal mistake, but it was the flocking instinct that turned it into a catastrophe. It is this very behavior that gave rise to the term sheeple, proof that following without discernment can turn instinct into tragedy.

A seasoned shepherd knows how to combine the two instincts of hierarchy and flocking. He hand-feeds the alphas regularly to build trust and reinforce the bond. When the leaders follow you, the rest will too. That is wisdom modern leaders would do well to borrow.

The same instincts that guide a flock across the meadow are alive in every team, family, and organization. Dominance and flocking do not just belong to sheep; they shape how people follow leaders today.

“FEAR MAY MOVE SHEEP FOR  
A MOMENT, BUT ONLY TRUST  
KEEPS THEM FOLLOWING.”

## YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD

Before we speak of modern leadership, let's look over our shoulder for a moment at one of my favorite stories of leadership. In 1914, Sir Ernest Shackleton set out to cross Antarctica with twenty-seven men aboard the *Endurance*. Ten months into the journey, the ship came to an abrupt halt in the pack ice, trapped and groaning as pressure built around the hull. For nearly a year, the crew lived aboard, listening as

the wood creaked and groaned in protest. (Yes, that is not a typo. Imagine a bunch of dudes stuck on a halted vessel for nearly a year.)

On October 27, 1915, the ice finally claimed her. A wave of pressure lifted the stern, tore off the rudder and keel, and freezing water rushed in. “She’s going, boys,” came the cry. “It is time to get off.” The men salvaged what they could, set up camp on the ice, and twenty-five days later, the *Endurance* convulsed once more before disappearing into the frigid sea. Shackleton’s crew was now stranded on the frozen ice with no ship, no radio, and no rescue.

And yet, against all odds, not one man was lost. Why? As Alfred Lansing records in *Endurance*, Shackleton was constantly alert to the moods of his men. He rotated tent assignments to prevent pockets of pessimism from festering, and he gave special attention to the natural leaders among the crew. If they stayed calm and optimistic, the rest would too. Shackleton knew what every shepherd knows: steady the influencers, and the flock will follow. The mood of a few is the mood of the crew.

“STEADY THE INFLUENCERS, AND  
THE FLOCK WILL FOLLOW.”

The same is true in every sphere of life: church, business, and family. People look to a few for cues. Some voices carry weight far beyond their official title. Some set the tone without ever standing behind a podium. If you lead those few well, the whole group moves.

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But here is the dilemma: modern leaders often believe they must move everyone at once. So we push, prod, micromanage, and exhaust ourselves. The result? Resistance. Frustration. Burnout.

The truth is simple: you do not lead crowds. You lead relationships. Influence doesn't flow from the stage; it's earned in the space between people.

And that leaves us with two critical questions:

1. How do you identify the often-hidden influencers?
2. How do you earn their trust so they will carry your vision forward?

“YOU DON'T LEAD CROWDS.  
YOU LEAD RELATIONSHIPS.”

We can scan the pages of history for models of leadership, but none stand as sufficient, enduring, and accurate as Jesus of Nazareth.

## FOLLOW THE GOOD SHEPHERD'S LEAD

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, understood that people, like sheep, respond best to influence that comes through relationship. Yes, He preached to the multitudes, ministered to the crowds, and fed thousands at a time, but He chose to build His movement by investing in a few.

Look closely at the gospel accounts, and you will notice His strategy. Jesus poured His life into a motley crew of disciples, and even within the Twelve, He drew three closer still: Peter, James, and John. These three were His “ride-or-die” brothers. It’s striking that Jesus invited them into moments no one else witnessed: the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:37–43), the glory of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8), and the agony of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–42).

They saw Him on the mountaintop of heavenly exaltation, standing beside Moses and Elijah. No Jewish man had ever witnessed Moses standing in the Promised Land, and this was just one of the many privileges of that moment. It was so awe-inspiring that Peter wanted to set up camp and stay there. They saw Jesus at His best, glorified by the Father. But they also saw Him at His lowest, alone in the garden of His most profound grief, sweating drops of blood. They saw the burden and expense of humanity’s sin crashing down on Him. These experiences would shape the hearts and minds of the Three.

From there, the circle widened in concentric rings: the Twelve, the Seventy, the multitudes. Leadership radiated outward like ripples in water.

The Good Shepherd never controlled people, nor did He push or prod them into submission. Instead, He built trust with a few and multiplied His influence through them. John, the disciple Jesus loved, was the only one who stood at the foot of the cross. His loyalty to Jesus had been forged through intimacy and trust. What he had seen and experienced drew him close when everyone else scattered. His willingness to stay near the cross was not born of duty but of devotion, the fruit of Good Shepherd leadership.

And consider the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. Jesus did not preach directly to the whole town of Sychar. Instead, He spoke candidly with one woman in a conversation that revolved around truth and grace. That single encounter was enough. She ran back into town and said, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” Many residents of Sychar believed in Jesus as the Messiah because of the testimony of the Samaritan woman (John 4:39). She was a hidden influencer—overlooked by her community but entrusted by Jesus to open the door for an entire town.

Then there is Saul, the zealous persecutor of Christians. On the road to Damascus, Jesus transformed him into Paul, the apostle who would carry the gospel across the Roman world. One man, redeemed and redirected, became the hinge between a small band of believers and a faith that would outlast the empire itself.

Jesus knew that if you shape the few, you can reach the many. He built His kingdom not by commanding crowds but by investing in influencers, some obvious, some hidden, some unlikely.

The same principle holds true today. George Washington shaped a nation by investing in a cadre of trusted officers. Steve Jobs did not design every Apple product; he built a team of visionaries who carried his culture forward. Military leaders do not give orders to every soldier directly; they develop officers who then lead their units.

In every case, great leaders find and form the influencers, whether faithful, hidden, or unlikely, and through them move the whole. The principle is as straightforward as it is simple: when you lead a few well, the rest will follow.

# The Shepherd's Habit

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## PROVIDE OUT-FRONT LEADERSHIP TO THE LEADERS WITHIN THE FLOCK

### Pause

Set the book down for a moment and take inventory of your flock. Who are the people in your circle who look to you, even subtly, for direction? Think of your family, your workplace, your church, and your community. Notice who naturally sets the tone in each setting — the ones others imitate, watch, or rally around. Write down two or three names.

### Discern

Look closely at the names on your list. What kind of influence do these people carry right now? Do they bring calm or stir anxiety? Do they multiply trust or sow division? Now turn the lens inward. How have your own insecurities, preferences, or blind spots kept you from investing in them? Reflect on how Jesus built His movement — not by winning crowds, but by pouring deeply into a few who would carry His vision forward.

### Lead

Choose one person from your list and take a deliberate step toward them this week. It might be offering a word of encouragement, entrusting them with a new responsibility, or simply spending time together over a meal or a walk. Pray specifically for that person, asking God to shape them through your investment and, in turn, to shape others through them. Shepherd the few, and the many will follow.