

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

Burning Questions 16

What is Heaven Like?

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

April 30, 2017

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2 Corinthians 5:1-10 (NASB)

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. **2** For indeed in this *house* we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, **3** inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. **4** For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. **5** Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. **6** Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord— **7** for we walk by faith, not by sight— **8** we are of good courage, I say, and prefer

rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. **9** Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. **10** For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

2 Cor. 5:1-10 is the most significant text about the intermediate state, and what happens when we die.

I'm fascinated that one of the most popular questions about the afterlife is "**Will my pet be in heaven?**"

Now, admittedly, I can't say for sure, because I haven't been there.

Isaiah describes the Messianic Kingdom in terms of peaceful coexistence:

Isaiah 11:6-9 (NLT)

6 In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all. **7** The cow will graze near the bear. The cub and the calf will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like a cow. **8** The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm. **9** Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the LORD.

There will be animals in heaven, because John the Revelator says in **Revelation 6:2** there is a **white horse**, and in **6:4** there is a **red horse**, and **6:5** there is a **black horse**, and in **6:8** a **sickly pale horse**.

And in speaking of Jesus' return from Heaven, he says:

Revelation 19:11-14 (NASB)

And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and

He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. 12 His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. 13 He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses.

And that is the totality of my knowledge of pets in heaven. Preachers used to talk about celestial streets of gold while congregations sang joyful hymns like “I’ll Fly Away” and “When the Roll is Called up Yonder.”

But the most passionate accounts of heaven now come from people outside the church.

Most seminaries don’t teach courses on heaven. Biblical scholars say most preachers avoid the topic altogether out of embarrassment, indifference or fear.

2 Cor. 5:1-10 is the most significant text about the intermediate state, and what happens when we die. There is a lot of interest in heaven.

You have Eric Clapton singing about his 5 year old son who fell 53 floors to his death, and Eric singing to his son his question:

**“Would you know my name;
If I saw you in heaven?
Would you feel the same;
If I saw you in heaven?
I must be strong and carry on;
‘Cause I know I don’t belong there in heaven.”**

Isn't it sad to know you don't belong in heaven?

And, then you have a committed believer like William Matthew Golden who only wrote two hymns, both very popular.

In 1918 he wrote and recorded "A BEAUTIFUL LIFE."

**Each day I'll do a golden deed,
By helping those who are in need,
My life on earth is but a span,
And so I'll do the best I can,
The best I can.**

But his most popular song was about Heaven, and he wrote it four years earlier.

It has been recorded by many popular singers, like The Carter Family, John Cash, Elvis Presley, Willie Nelson, Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs, The Jordanaires, Pete Seeger, and the list of artists goes on and on.

William Golden was a member of the church of Christ.

Born in 1878 in Mississippi, and spent his entire life there.

He died in a automobile accident in 1934.

He recorded and published his most popular hymn in 1914.

He titled it "**TO CANAAN'S LAND I'M ON MY WAY.**"

**To Canaan's land I'm on my way,
Where the soul of man never dies;
My darkest night will turn to day,
Where the soul of man never dies.**

**Dear friends, there'll be no sad farewells,
There'll be no tear dimmed eyes,
Where all is peace and joy and love,
And the soul of man never dies.**

Bro. Golden really understood the Biblical concept of the soul continuing on after it's separation from the body.

But...let me ask you...

Where do you get your understanding of what life after death is like?

Remember the little book which allegedly gives a little boys outer body experiences.

And that little book has become the authority on what takes place after death.

Nearly 20 million copies of the book had been sold.

And of course Hollywood jumped on the book and made a movie based on it.

The producers of the movie hoped to make a little more than \$7 million dollars, but it has brought in more than \$110 million.

John Piper argues against such books from

Isaiah 8:19 (NASB)

19 When they say to you, "Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter," should not a people consult their God? *Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?*

He says:

"God's beef with necromancy is that it belittles the sufficiency of his communication. Why would you inquire of the dead to find out what you want to know instead of inquiring of me? And if they say: Well, I have inquired of you and you didn't tell me what I want to know. He would say: Well, that is your problem. I have told you what you need to know. You don't need to know about such and such if I haven't told you. And, in fact, if you go trying to inquire about such and such that I haven't told you, you are dishonoring me. So that is the nature of the argument. And, therefore, I think the prohibition of séances and necromancy applies to this kind of thing and people ought to stop writing those books."

John MacArthur adds:

"For anyone who truly believes the biblical record, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that these modern testimonies—with their relentless self-focus and the relatively scant attention they pay to the glory of God—are

simply untrue. They are either figments of the human imagination (dreams, hallucinations, false memories, fantasies, and in the worst cases, deliberate lies), or else they are products of demonic deception.

We know this with absolute certainty, because Scripture definitively says that people do not go to heaven and come back: "Who has ascended to heaven and come down?" ([Proverbs 30:4](#)). Answer: "*No one* has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" ([John 3:13](#), emphasis added). All the accounts of heaven in Scripture are visions, not journeys taken by dead people. And even visions of heaven are very, very rare in Scripture. You can count them all on one hand."

According to religious news service, the movie was seen by more non-Christians than Christians.

What this tells us is that the world is being informed on the concept of Heaven by Hollywood.
Not Scripture.

You have Hollywood producing TV series like
Seventh Heaven
and
Touched by an Angel

Do you know where the "**seventh heaven**" is found?
It's found in the Koran.

What we can say with assurance is that Hollywood passes on a lot of misconceptions.

I have to admit I enjoyed the "**Touched By An Angel**" series, and I also enjoyed the movie, "**It's a Wonderful Life**" starring Jimmy Stewart.

But, truthfully, both presented a greatly distorted view of life after death.

And, both have had a heavy influence on what the man on the street thinks about life after death.

Let's notice **three things about what happens when a person dies.**

I. In Our Earthly Life We Are Tent Camping

2 Corinthians 5:1 (NASB)

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Our present body is an “**earthly tent,**” but our new body is “**a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens**”

How many of you have ever spent at least one night sleeping in a tent?

The main thing to understand is that a tent is a temporary dwelling compared to a building, which is relatively permanent.

Your body is like a tent, and who you really are lives in the body.

In describing our bodies, Paul says

2 Corinthians 4:16 (NASB)

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

You have a visible, outward presence as well as an invisible, inward presence.

The outward person is your body, and the inward person is your soul.

And, before I forget it, whenever I speak of the soul I could just as easily said spirit.

Because both soul and spirit are used interchangeably in both the OT and the NT.

So the real you, the invisible you, lives within a body like a camper lives in a tent.

When you look at me, you can only see the “**outer me**” but there is also an “**inner me.**”

President Woodrow Wilson’s favorite limerick was:

**“I know my face ain’t no star;
But I don’t mind it; cause I’m behind it;
It’s the one in front who get the jar.”**

A. Your Body Wears Out and Eventually Dies

Paul said **our outer man is decaying**

Paul wrote about this tent **decaying.**

That’s a reference to death.

It may be destroyed slowly by old age or by some disease.

Or it could be destroyed suddenly, like an automobile accident, or a soldier being shot.

But we all have one thing in common.

This tent isn’t permanent, one day we’ll move out of it.

Everyone has to deal with the thought of death.

A minister was trying to press this idea to his congregation. He said, “One day, every member of this church is going to die!”

There was a young college man started laughing.

The minister said, “What’s so funny about that?”

The young man said, “I’m not a member of this church!”

I’ve read there’s a tombstone with an epitaph that says:

“Remember young man, as you pass by;

**As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, you soon shall be.
So prepare, young man, to follow me.”**

Someone added a note to the tombstone that said,
**“To follow you is not my intent.
Until I know which way you went!”**

B. Your Soul Lives Forever

**C.S. Lewis once wrote, “You don’t have a soul. You are a soul.
You have a body.”**

We spend a lot of time, money, and attention on our bodies.
But Jesus said,

Mark 8:35-37 (NASB)

“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. 36 “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? 37 “For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

The comedian, George Carlin, who is Roman Catholic, once observed:

“I was thinking about how people seem to read the Bible a whole lot more as they get older; then it dawned on me ... they’re cramming for their final exam.”

While you are thinking about that, here’s something else to mull over.

While your tent is getting more and more feeble, it’s entirely possible that your spirit is getting more and more renewed.

I’ve lived for eight decades in this tent, and while I’ve had my share of eye and lung problems, every day I’m more excited about living for Jesus than ever before.

The old hymn we sing now makes even more sense.

Remember when you used to sing:

**Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before.
Everyday with Jesus I love him more and more.
Jesus saves and keeps me, and He's the one I'm living for.
Everyday with Jesus is sweeter than the day before.**

For believers

II. Death Allows Us To Be At Home With The Lord

2 Corinthians 5:8 (NASB)

we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

Paul sure give us some words of encouragement in that text:
to be at home with the Lord.

At the point of death, our body quits functioning, but our soul immediately go to another realm, which is invisible.

Unbelievers go immediately into a realm which is called Tartarus.

Believers go immediately into a realm which is called Paradise.

A tombstone in Nantucket, Massachusetts really describes what happens to a Christian at death:

**“Under the sod; And under the trees;
Lies the body; Of Jonathan Pease.
But Pease isn't here; This is just the pod;
Peas shelled out; And went to God.”**

A. We Will Be Souls Without Bodies

2 Corinthians 5:1-4 (NASB)

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 For indeed in this *house* we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, 3 inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. 4

For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.

From this Scripture, and others, we gain the picture that after death, whether we are in Paradise or Tartarus, we leave our bodies behind in the grave.

And, we can see from this text that being without a body is an unnatural state for us.

We will be in this intermediate state, which is spiritual by nature, and our earthly bodies would be quiet out of place there.

We will be without bodies, but one day we will be re clothed with a new body.

B. We will Be Conscious

1 Samuel 28:8-12, 15-17 (NASB)

Then Saul disguised himself by putting on other clothes, and went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night; and he said, "Conjure up for me, please, and bring up for me whom I shall name to you." 9 But the woman said to him, "Behold, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off those who are mediums and spiritists from the land. Why are you then laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?" 10 Saul vowed to her by the LORD, saying, "As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." 11 Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" And he said, "Bring up Samuel for me." 12 When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out ... 17 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" ... 16 Samuel said, "...the LORD has departed from you and has become your adversary? 17 "The LORD has done accordingly as He spoke through me; for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, to David.

And you remember at the Transfiguration in Matthew 17, that Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus.

And you remember the rich man and Lazarus and that the rich man was able to converse with Abraham.

The fact that God allowed Samuel to talk with Saul, and the fact that God allowed Moses and Elijah to talk with Jesus, and the fact that God demonstrates the dead can talk implies a continuing conscious existence.

C. We Will Not Have Contact With Those Still on Earth

As we saw in the account of Samuel and the account of Moses and Elijah, so at least twice Scripture mentions the dead contacting those who are alive.

But both of these events are clearly miraculous exceptions.

I know you remember that Abraham refused to send a messenger to warn the rich man's brothers.

And the reason why is because God has expressly forbid such activity.

Attempts to contact the spirits of the dead are called spiritism, and spiritism is unconditionally condemned in Scripture.

Leviticus 19:31 (NASB)

Do not turn to mediums or spiritists; do not seek them out to be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 20:6, 27 (NASB)

6 'As for the person who turns to mediums and to spiritists, to play the harlot after them, I will also set My face against that person and will cut him off from among his people. 27 'Now a man or a woman who is a medium or a spiritist shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones, their

bloodguiltiness is upon them."

Deuteronomy 18:9-12 (NASB)

"When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. 10 "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, 11 or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. 12 "For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you.

I have concluded that since God has so strenuously forbid sorcery and spiritism, that such activity is Satanic in origin.

So, we will be bodiless, conscious, not able to talk with those left behind on earth.

But...

D. We Will Be In The Presence of Jesus

When Paul was writing to the church in Philippi he said

Philippians 1:21-23 (NASB)

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 But if *I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. 23 But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that is very much better*;

Death is a departure of our soul and spirit to be with Jesus.

Paul used a triple superlative to describe it.

"very much better" doesn't capture the thought.

It should be translated, **"Much much much more better."**

That's not good grammar, but it's good theology.

A Christian shouldn't fear death.

Paul tells us

Hebrews 12:22-24 (NASB)

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant

Read that carefully.

Paul tells us we that every Christian is an inhabitant and citizen of Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

The full citizenship of this spiritual domain includes “**myriads of angels,**”

plus all members of the “**church of the firstborn,**”

plus “**God, the Judge of all,**”

and “**Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.**”

Most significantly the circle of fellowship in which every Christian participates includes “**the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect .**”

This phrase confirms the reality of an intermediate state.

“***the* righteous**” refers to all saints, OT and NT.

“**made perfect**” refers to their full sanctification, which is guaranteed only at death; thus the phrase describes saints who have already died.

That they are referred to only as *spirits* is clear proof that after death they exist in a disembodied state, as unclothed spirits awaiting their resurrection bodies.

That these righteous spirits are part of the total citizenry of the heavenly Jerusalem, linked together with angels, the church on earth, God the Father, and Jesus Christ, implies that they are fully existent and fully conscious, and in full fellowship with all the others.

Death for a Christian is departing to be with Jesus.

In the final days of this earthly life, when Paul was about to be executed, he wrote to Timothy and said,

2 Timothy 4:6 (NASB)

the time of my departure has come.

“**departure**” was a word used to describe a soldier who broke camp and folded up his tent to move on to another assignment. It was also a word used to describe a prisoner set free from his chains.

For a Christian, death is not an ominous, scary prospect.

It is something we can face with as much confidence as we have when we leave one room and walk into another.

For a Christian, death is a change of duty station.

Death is a change of duty station but it is not a Permanent Change.

There will be another Permanent Change to follow.

John Quincy Adams was the sixth President of the United States - in office from 1825 to 1829

His last words, spoken on collapsing in the U.S. Senate, February 21, 1848, two days before he died, were:

This, is the last of Earth. I am content.

Well, to paraphrase Dwight L. Moody, someday you will read in the papers, "A. L. Miller of Orcutt, CA is dead."

Don't you believe a word of it!

At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now; I shall have left this old clay tenement and moved into a house that is immortal—a body that death cannot touch, that sin cannot taint; a body fashioned like unto His glorious body.

I was born of the flesh in 1935.

I was born of the Spirit in 1956.

That which is born of the flesh will die.

That which is born of the Spirit will live forever.

III. At The Resurrection We Will Have New Bodies

Bodilessness and consciousness as such are experienced by everyone in the intermediate state.

But what will be experienced while we are conscious will differ depending on whether one is saved or lost.

The Bible states quite clearly that some will be in torment while others are in bliss.

Obviously, the answer to “what happens when a person dies” depends on whether or not that person knows Jesus.

This series is on heaven, but the Bible also teaches that those who die without a personal relationship with God spend eternity separated from Him.

In Luke 16 Jesus pulled back the veil from the afterlife and revealed what happened when two people died.

There was a rich man, whose name isn't given, and there was a beggar named Lazarus.

Lazarus died and Jesus said that the angels carried him to Abraham's bosom.

That's another word for paradise.

Because for any good Jew, joining Abraham would be a heavenly experience.

The rich man died and woke up in Hades.

He was suffering, and to make matters worse, he could look into paradise and see Lazarus and Abraham.

Luke 16:24 (NASB)

"And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.'

Notice the rich man had a sense of a body.

He could see and recognize Lazarus and he understood Lazarus had a finger and he had a tongue.
He had the physical sense of suffering.

The rich man wasn't yet in hell, he was in Hades, which is hellish in nature.
The suffering is ongoing and unabated, but it is not the same thing as the final state of Hell itself.

Hades is like the county jail before a prisoner is sentenced to the state penitentiary.

Lazarus wasn't yet in the final heaven, he was in paradise, the current heaven.
Paradise is like the waiting room for our final heaven, but it is heavenly in nature.

This interim bliss of the redeemed is delightful.
There will be no tears there.
You will not have arthritic pain there.
It will be a place of joy unspeakable, and full of glory.
But it is not the final place where we will spend eternity.
Even though we will be in bliss while in Paradise, we have something far grander to look forward to.

In this interim state of bliss we will be existing in hope and anticipation of the final day when we will receive our new bodies and be allowed to enter our final home.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 (NASB)

Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

One implication of the fact that the intermediate state will be either torment or bliss is that we will know as soon as we die whether we are saved or lost.

We will not have to wait for the judgment day to find out where we will spend eternity.

Where will you be five nanoseconds after you die?
Some people might answer, "I don't care."
But you will care five seconds after you die.

Others answer, "I don't know."
How sad not to have assurance of eternal life.
But if you have placed your faith in Jesus, and complied with His terms of pardon, you can say with assurance, I shall

2 Corinthians 5:8 (NASB)
be at home with the Lord.

Prayer and Invitation

Unit 3: God's Pervasive and Sustaining Love

April 30 Lesson 9 Protecting Love

Devotional Reading: Matthew 18:1-5, 10-14

Background Scripture: John 10:1-15

JOHN 10:1-15

1 “Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 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. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” 6 Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. 7 Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. 11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 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. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

KEY VERSES

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 10:14, 15

Introduction

A. Mistaken Identity

Most of us have experienced the embarrassment of mistaken identity. We see someone across the room whom we think we recognize. We wave. That person waves back, but with a puzzled expression. We speak to someone standing behind us, thinking that person is a friend or family member. He or she responds uncertainly, if at all. Cases of mistaken identity cause confusion; those people are not who we think they are.

Today's text is about removing confusion regarding the identity of the one who leads, protects, and provides for God's people. Many claim to be God's designate for that role. But our text says that only one such claim is genuine. Only one individual can make us God's people and give us the life that God offers.

B. Lesson Background

Our text, from the middle of John's Gospel, records part of a series of conflict episodes between Jesus and his opponents. Important for context is the account of Jesus' healing of a man born blind (John 9), which occurs just before today's text. The healed man was confronted by religious leaders who were opposed to Jesus. But their opposition made the healed man all the more certain that Jesus had been sent by God (9:13-33).

The infuriated leaders threw the man out, effectively claiming that they had cut him off from fellowship with God's people (John 9:34). Subsequently, Jesus identified himself to the man as the one God had sent (9:35-38). The story closes with further confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders (9:40, 41).

In providing the backdrop for today's text, that account addresses this question: Who truly governs God's people? In other words, do the religious leaders of Jesus' day decide who belongs in God's people and who is excluded, or does that authority lie elsewhere? The conflict between Jesus and his opponents concerning who Jesus is and what that means for God's people was accelerating. Jesus' use of the phrase "I am the" occurs four times in today's text (John 10:7, 9, 11, 14). These form part of the larger picture of

Jesus' use of the phrase on other occasions in this Gospel (see John 6:35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). The phrases serve as Jesus' claims regarding his unique role in God's plan to be the one who fulfills God's promises in finality.

But more than that, the phrase "I am" echoes God's statement to Moses that Moses should tell Israel that "I am" was the one sending him (Exodus 3:14; compare John 8:58). As Jesus used this expression, he was saying something about himself that implied that he was divine, God himself in human flesh. Jesus' opponents certainly didn't miss this implication, given their immediate attempts to stone him (John 8:59).

Our text focuses on shepherd imagery in regard to "I am the" statements. Keeping flocks of sheep and goats was a vital part of the economy of the biblical world. Shepherds often spent day and night with their animals to keep them nourished and safe (compare Luke 2:8).

The Old Testament frequently draws on these practices in depicting God as shepherd and his people as sheep (examples: Psalms 23:1; 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10). His faithful shepherding is contrasted with the harmful shepherding by others (Ezekiel 34; etc.). This history, familiar to Jesus' audience, is what he draws on as he delivers this discourse.

I. Jesus the Entryway

(John 10:1-10)

A. Imagery (vv. 1-6)

1. "Very truly I tell you Pharisees, 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 Greek behind the translation *truly* is often transliterated as *amen* (example: Revelation 1:6). A word that is often used as a solemn finality, Jesus uses here to begin a statement. The intensified *very truly* stresses the importance and reliability of what he is about to say.

How to Say It

Ezekiel Ee-*zeek*-ee-ul or Ee-*zeek*-yul.

Hosea Ho-*zay*-uh.

Isaiah Eye-*zay*-uh.

Jeremiah Jair-uh-*my*-uh.

The image of *the gate of the sheep pen* illustrates the difference between those who intend to harm the sheep and the one who cares for them. A sheep pen is an outdoor area bounded with a low stone wall. Sheep can be kept there overnight for safety. The gate is the opening in the wall. It is guarded in such a way so that sheep do not wander out and predators do not enter. Any person or creature who enters by climbing over the wall is clearly not the sheep's protector.

We keep in mind that Jesus makes this point just after his rebuke of religious leaders in John 9:40, 41 (see the Lesson Background). His implication is clear: those leaders who claim to decide who belongs to God's people and who does not are the ones who come in over the wall.

What Do You Think?

What plans should a church have in place for dealing with "a thief and a robber" as Jesus uses that phrase?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of advance recognition

In terms of notifying leadership (sounding the alarm)

In terms of leadership response

In terms of repairing damage done

In terms of preventing recurrence

2. "The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

We should note that Jesus' illustration is not an elaborate allegory. That is, each detail of the story is not intended to correspond with an event in reality. Jesus is probably not thinking of a particular event in his life when he speaks of *the shepherd entering by the gate*. Rather, this detail is intended to contribute to the larger contrast between the shepherd and those who do not care for the flock as the shepherd does.

3. "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.

The gatekeeper is the assistant shepherd who guards the opening to the sheepfold. He recognizes the true shepherd and gives him access. Likewise, *the sheep* recognize their shepherd's *voice*. Shepherds in the Middle East today reportedly use distinctive calls to which their sheep are conditioned to respond. Jesus seems to draw on a similar custom as he describes the sheep's response to the shepherd. Only the shepherd leads the sheep out to safe pasture (compare Psalm 23:2, lesson 5).

4. “When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. The depiction of the shepherd's care and the sheep's recognition continues. When daylight comes, it is time to exit the sheep pen for food and water. To get the sheep to the needed nourishment, shepherds of the biblical world do not drive their sheep from behind, but lead them from the front (*goes on ahead of them*). The sheep's recognition of the shepherd makes that possible; the word *voice* is used for the second time for emphasis in this regard (compare John 3:29; 5:25, 28; 18:37).

5. “But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.”

This third use of the word *voice* contrasts the leading of the true shepherd with that of a pretender (*a stranger*). The sheep do not recognize the voice of others, so they view them as a threat. These sheep are like the man healed of blindness. In contrast with his parents (John 9:18-23), he had refused to cower before the religious leaders but responded to Jesus instead (9:24-38). Bad things happen when wrong voices are heeded (2 Peter 2:1; etc.).

What Do You Think?

What are some things churches do to ensure that their teachers speak with the voice of Christ?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With regard to evaluating their track record in teaching (the past)

With regard to ongoing training (the present)

In terms of periodic monitoring (the future)

Other

6. Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Jesus' opponents are nearby, listening to him teach. But as he has said before, they are blind to the truth because they claim that they can "see" (John 9:39-41). They cannot believe that God has authorized anyone other than themselves to speak for him and to lead his people. Thus, they refuse to listen as Jesus paints the portrait of the shepherd. They will not admit that instead of being shepherds who cares for the sheep, they are more like thieves who fleece the flock.

B. Identity (vv. 7-10)

7. Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep."

Again by use of *very truly*, Jesus solemnly emphasizes that he is speaking a vital truth. That emphasis is underlined by the use of *I am the*, with its implications as noted in the Lesson Background. Jesus' claim to be *the gate for the sheep* may be surprising until we understand that shepherds often block entrances to sheepfolds with their bodies. They do so by lying across the opening at night so that nothing gets in or out without their consent.

In light of the controversy over the man healed of blindness, Jesus is making the audacious claim that he alone decides who belongs with God's people and who does not (contrast John 9:22, 34). The religious leaders do not make that determination. No one does but Jesus. And certainly no one truly decides who belongs to God except God himself. Thus, Jesus uses the suggestive *I am* to make this statement.

Taken with the earlier discourse, we understand Jesus' point: those who listen to and believe him are the sheep who listen to the true shepherd. They belong to the true flock. They are granted entry to the sheepfold. Jesus' followers are God's true people.

8. "All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them."

There can be only one chief shepherd. Anyone who pretends to be him is in the category of *thieves and robbers*. An example of how such false shepherds operate is found in Luke 19:45, 46, where worship acts of sacrifice are opportunities for profit. Most directly associated with the text before us is, again, the situation of the man healed of blindness. Note that the religious leaders would have preferred that the man not be healed rather than have it done on a Sabbath (John 9:14-16). This contrast makes clear that the shepherd stands alone and that there is no legitimate alternative to hearing his voice and following him.

SPIRITUAL CHARLATANS

Jim Jones (1931-1978) started his ministry career in Indianapolis. But it was after he moved his Peoples Temple to California in the late 1960s that he gained notoriety. His ministry focused on issues of social justice, and he developed a large following among society's downtrodden.

For a time, Jones was endorsed by many leading politicians. But following his exposure as a cult leader, he moved his congregation to "Jonestown" in Guyana. His little empire came crashing down in 1978 with the mass suicide and murder of over 900 people there, including Jones himself.

In retrospect, Jim Jones was merely one spiritual charlatan in a line stretching back centuries. God had to deal with such individuals even within the ranks of his chosen people (Isaiah 1:23; Jeremiah 7:9-11; Hosea 7:1-3; etc.). They stand in stark contrast with Jesus, who stands ever vigilant for the well-being of his flock. The saga of Jim Jones reminds us that only Jesus is worthy of unconditional trust.—C. R. B.

9. "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.

Jesus repeats his claim to be *the gate*—the only way to enter the flock of God's people. The one who enters Jesus' sheep pen *will be saved*, that is, be kept safe from harm.

As the sheep are led to and from the sheep pen, they *find pasture* needed to survive and thrive (compare John 4:13, 14; 6:27, 55).

The shepherd's gift to them is life, and they have it only because of the shepherd.

What Do You Think?

What are some specific ways your church can better express the truth that Christ is the only means of access to eternal life?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In modification of tradition or routine

In special times of the year

In church discipline

In curriculum selection

Other

10. “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

When we watch how *the thief* behaves toward the sheep, we see only self-interest. Thieves, by definition, do not act in the best interest of the sheep. Rather, they take advantage of the sheep.

They bring death. Serving as examples are the religious leaders who seek to dissuade people from faith in Jesus (John 9:22-34).

They are thieves who act out of self-interest, even at the expense of covering up the truth (11:48).

But the true shepherd does the opposite. He doesn't take, but gives. Jesus gives life where others give death. He protects and provides for his flock. And not just a little! Life from Jesus is abundant, like the overflowing cup in the Shepherd Psalm (Psalm 23:5). Jesus gives not just what is necessary for survival but what results in life in its divinely intended fullness.

What Do You Think?

In what specific ways can and should the nature of a Christian's abundant life in Christ be apparent to others?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding what unbelievers see, considering 1 Corinthians 9:20; 10:27, 32; Philippians 1:13; Colossians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12; 1 Timothy 3:7; 5:13; etc.

Regarding what fellow believers see, considering Matthew 6:1-18, 25; John 13:14-17; Romans 14:1, 13; 1 Corinthians 10:32; 11:1; Philippians 1:14; Hebrews 10:25; etc.

II. Jesus the Good Shepherd

(John 10:11-15)

A. Giving and Caring (vv. 11-13)

11a “I am the good shepherd.

Jesus now changes the metaphor slightly, making in the process a claim that is even more direct and audacious. As before, the phrase *I am the* carries the implications noted in the Lesson Background, particularly with the added descriptor *good*. The term *shepherd* is used in Israel’s Scriptures for God or his promised messianic king. Jesus’ claim of it for himself indicates fulfillment (see Genesis 49:24; Psalm 80:1; Ezekiel 34:23; 37:24; etc.).

11b “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Some Old Testament kings and priests were good at being shepherds of the people in a relative sense (example: Psalm 78:70-72). But Jesus is good in an exceptional way. Not only does he lead, feed, and protect the sheep, he also willingly *lays down his life for* them.

Certainly this description strikes Jesus’ audience as astonishing! They know that a shepherd takes risks to protect the sheep, his most valuable possession. But dying for one’s sheep is out of the question. The sheep live for the shepherd, not the other way around. But Jesus is a shepherd like no other.

Time will be needed for Jesus’ meaning to be clear. When he is arrested, Jesus will insist that the soldiers let his followers go free as he surrenders himself willingly (John 18:3-9). His death will not be a case in which someone else takes his life; he will lay it down himself. It will be an act of sacrifice that serves as “a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

12, 13. “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.

Again Jesus depicts figures to contrast with the shepherd. These figures serve to emphasize the shepherd's one-of-a-kind nature. Certainly we would expect a thief or robber (John 10:1) to have no concern for the sheep. But even a hired undershepherd—one who does not own the flock but is paid to care for it—lacks the shepherd's commitment. This hireling is just there to do a job; he has no personal interest in the sheep.

As fine as other leaders of God's people may be, only Jesus is the good shepherd in an absolute sense. No one but he places the flock's well-being first. As the good shepherd, Jesus will give his very life for the sake of his people.

WHO CARES?

A hallmark of the Great Recession that began in 2007 was home foreclosures. These resulted when many people allowed themselves to be lured into taking out larger mortgages than they could afford.

The unscrupulous lenders, mortgage brokers, etc., who did the luring were said to have engaged in predatory lending practices. These practices thrived in commission-driven environments that lacked accountability. Many, many home buyers trusted their assurances that housing prices would climb forever. No one seemed to have the client's best interest at heart, as self-interest ruled. The resulting foreclosures became a tidal wave across the stumbling economy—not just in America, but also in funds worldwide that had invested in mortgages.

Jesus' contrast between himself and those merely hired to do a job still applies. But where do we fit in that illustration? We are not the good shepherd himself, of course. But neither are we to be the hireling who runs away at the first sign of danger. It's impossible for us to know and care for Jesus' flock as he does. Peter received instructions in this regard (see John 21:15-17), and he has passed them along to us: "To the elders among you, I appeal ... Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them" (1 Peter 5:1, 2).—C. R. B.

B. Knows and Known (vv. 14, 15)

14. “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—

A second time Jesus states that he is *the good shepherd*, again underlining the claim to be and do what only God is and does. The fact that he knows his sheep is a further implication of being able to call them by name (John 10:3, above).

The knowing is reciprocal: those whom Jesus knows as his sheep know him as shepherd in return. A precise example is the blind man just healed (John 9:35-38). Jesus knows the difference between true believers and those superficially impressed with him and his miracles (2:23-25). Those who know him as the shepherd are his true sheep, by his declaration, because they acknowledge him.

What Do You Think?

What are some specific ways to exhibit confidence that Christ knows us as his sheep?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In what we do routinely

In how we react to special opportunities

In what we think

In what we say

Other

15. “just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

The knowledge of the shepherd and the sheep for each other is mirrored in the knowledge of *the Father* for the Son. Jesus’ reference to God as Father is noteworthy. In John’s Gospel, this is one means by which Jesus affirms his knowledge of God.

That knowledge is based on something different than others’ knowledge of God. Jesus knows God not by teaching, but by personal experience that no one else has (John 3:13; 7:28, 29; 8:14, 23, 54-58).

As a son knows his father, Jesus the Son knows God the Father. As the one who comes from Heaven, Jesus knows God the Father, the one who abides in Heaven. And as Jesus does and claims to be

what only God can do and who he alone is, Jesus shows that he knows God because he *is* God. Jesus' authority is greater than that of any other, in his own time or in any other.

So—how awestruck are we with this one who is very God, the one who willingly surrenders his life for the sake of his sheep? How different is he from any other shepherd—good or bad—of our experience? How far beyond our expectation is his love for us?

Conclusion

A. Follow the True Shepherd

Today's text is both disturbing and reassuring. It is disturbing because we prefer to think that there are many ways to find God. Yet Jesus says that he is the one who is the shepherd, the gate to the sheep pen. Apart from him, there is no abundant life.

But that message is also reassuring. We do not need to discover our own path to God. We do not need to work a plan by which we find real life for ourselves. We need merely to listen to the true shepherd and follow him. He leads, provides, and protects. We follow, receive, and trust. That is the way of abundant life, the way for true sheep of the good shepherd.

B. Prayer

Father, we commit ourselves to follow your Son, to be secure in what he provides, to honor the life he gave for us as we give freely of ourselves for others. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Accept no substitute shepherd.

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