

The Gospel of John
Session Twenty-Two: The Unbelief of the Jewish Leaders
Commentary

John 10:22-42

10:22–24. For forty years I have signed official documents for three colleges and two seminaries. Often I write out the full name complete with middle initial, but in-house documents required only the initials KOG that I have signed thousands of time. Putting either my name or initials on a document indicates not only that I have read it but more likely that I have written it and am now officially and personally identifying myself with it. That is what these verses provide for the sheep—a signature, an identity by which people can know they belong to the one true shepherd.

Some time later, during the Feast of Dedication which we commemorate as Hanukkah, Jesus came to Jerusalem, still the target of the Pharisees and unbelieving Jews. At the invitation of the Jews to tell us plainly if he was really the Messiah, Jesus returned again to the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep pen and emphasized the security for those sheep who belong to the true shepherd.

In these few verses John almost wrote like Luke with a seasonal notation, specific geographical reference, and identification of the surrounding crowd. The Feast of Dedication was also a Feast of Lights pointing to a time when Messiah would come to the temple and throw out all invaders, thereby reestablishing the kingdom. These grand visions persisted in the Israeli nation until the sack by the Romans in a.d. 70. The attack on Jesus claiming that he was demon possessed takes on greater impact when we recognize that “Johannine writings never mention any miracle of exorcism on Jesus’ part but employ this language only to report the way his opponents described his utterances and behavior” (Tenney, Merrill C. *The Gospel of John*. Expositor’s Bible Commentary. Vol. 9. Ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, EBC, p. 110).

10:25–26. Here is our key word again—believe—appearing in both verses and indicating that the first characteristic of true sheep is that they believe in the shepherd. Jesus made faith the cardinal issue separating unbelieving Jews from the true sheep. His miracles had been done publicly and in the Father’s name, but unbelievers seemed unmoved by these divine acts because you are not my sheep. To be sure, one becomes a true sheep by placing faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. But once the Holy Spirit implants that nature in us, we respond to the Shepherd because that is what sheep do.

10:27. Though only thirteen words long in the English text, this verse identifies two more signatures of the sheep: they listen to the shepherd and then they follow the shepherd. This is not new information since we found it in verse 16, but repetition emphasizes importance. True sheep listen to the shepherd; false sheep pay no attention.

This segment of John's Gospel, particularly this portion of the chapter, overflows with basic doctrine. Consider the following list:

- Union of Christ: "my sheep"
- Calling: "listen to my voice"
- Identification: "I know them"
- Sanctification: "they follow me"
- Grace: "I give"
- Security: "eternal life"
- Election: "given them to me"
- Omnipotence: "greater than all"

10:28. Yet another signature of true sheep is that they receive eternal life from the Shepherd. Surely this is one of the strongest verses in the Bible emphasizing the believer's assurance of life in heaven. In one short verse Jesus stated it three ways: I give them eternal life ... they shall never perish ... no one can snatch them out of my hand. How did the old Swedish hymn writer put it? "More secure is no one ever than the loved ones of the Savior." Yet this security, this assurance that God will honor faith in the Good Shepherd should not be claimed apart from a balance of biblical responsibility. Borchert spells it out in clear terms:

The perishing of true sheep was an unthinkable idea to early Christians. But contemporary Christians often wrestle with the question because they fail to perceive the logic of the biblical writers. Moreover, they often fail to read thoroughly texts like Hebrews 6. The biblical writers did not have such a superficial view of salvation that would consider walking down the aisle of a church and going through the waters of baptism to be a guarantee of salvation. Nor did the biblical writers have a superficial temporal view of salvation based on an inadequate understanding of John 3:3 and other passages. Instead, the biblical writers have no problem placing side by side texts concerning God's love, grace and covenant promises with God's stern warnings to the readers of the Scripture (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 339).

10:29–30. Sheep signatures, we now know, include belief in the Shepherd, listening to the Shepherd, following the Shepherd, receiving eternal life from the Shepherd, and now protection by the Shepherd's Father. This is not just the promise of a Galilean prophet whose miracles substantiated his claim to greatness. Throughout the entire narrative of John, Jesus repeatedly referred to the Father's power. Even if the unbelieving Jews doubted his ability and authority, they could never doubt the omnipotence of the Father.

But that is precisely the point of unbelief. Since they did not believe that this itinerant prophet, this carpenter from Nazareth, had any relationship with God, they did not see him as their shepherd. But his response was clear: I and the Father are one. Numerous verses in the Bible establish the deity of Jesus Christ, but few are as precise and pointed as this one.

Modern theologians argue that Jesus died a martyr's death because the people of his day misunderstood him. They argue that Jesus never claimed to be God and could have escaped death by denying this confusion. But the confusion is theirs. Jesus intended everyone who heard him speak to understand precisely that he made himself equal with God in every way—and that is why they killed him.

Nor can we miss the hint of election at the beginning of verse 29 when we read, My Father, who has given them to me. There can be no greater security, no safer shelter, no more sure salvation, and no more clear signature than this relationship to the God of the Bible through his Son the Good Shepherd. No wonder Paul could write, "Your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).

Lightner summarizes for us: "What security! The eternal presence of the Father and the Son guarantees the eternal security of the believer. The life which Christ gives is 'eternal.' Those possessing it shall 'never perish.' No one shall pluck the sheep from the Shepherd's hand. The irrevocable word of the Shepherd is, 'No one shall be able to snatch them out of the Father's hand'" (Lightner, Robert P. *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991, p. 235).

10:31–33. Scarcely had Jesus proclaimed, "I and the Father are one" before the Jews picked up stones to stone him. Such blasphemy deserved death by stoning. How can anyone misunderstand a passage like this? They could hardly challenge the miracles or deny what so many people attested to be true. The issue was his nagging claim to deity. To put it another way, they nailed Jesus to the cross not for his works, but for his words.

As Boice explains, "Four important conclusions follow from this truth concerning Jesus' nature: (1) We have the knowledge of God in Him, for He is God; (2) we have forgiveness of sins in Him, for His death had infinite merit in atoning for sin; (3) we have victory over circumstances in Him, for he lived above circumstances; and (4) we have triumph over death in Him, for He rose from the dead and has promised to so raise all whom the Father has given to Him (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54)" (Boice, James M. *The Gospel of John* (5 vols.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, p. 145).

10:34–36. Here we come to a section of this chapter more difficult to understand. Verse 34 quotes Psalm 82:6 in conjunction with Exodus 4:16 which says about Aaron, "He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him." The word of God came to Moses, yet Moses was called (in metaphoric form) "God." If such could be said of Moses, how much more so the one who is really God sent into the world by the Father?

The Scripture cannot be broken was a strong tribute by the Son of God to the solidarity and inspiration of the Old Testament. Tenney cites other such illustrations in this Gospel (1:45; 2:22; 3:14–15; 5:39; 12:14–16; 13:18; 19:18, 24, 28, 36) and says, "Whether all these other passages refer to Jesus' explicit statements or to the writer's explanation of his action, they presuppose a

confidence in the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture that is in keeping with Jesus' attitude" (Tenney, EBC, p. 113).

10:37–39. Jesus reminded the Jews that they had a basic test for truth teaching: if people who claim to be God's Son do not do God's will, then their claims can be challenged. But the contrary should also prevail. If Jesus' behavior had been marked by the kind of righteousness and power that people associated with the God they had worshiped, why not believe his words and attribute his works to God? If they had done that, the unbelieving Jews would have understood that the Father was in the Son and the Son in the Father.

All this poured more fuel on an already raging fire. The more truth Jesus proclaimed, the less they believed him and the more they sought to kill him. Carson calls the relationship described here between the Son and the Father "mutual co-inherence—each is 'in' the other," and observes, "however precious such teaching might be to later believers, it was further evidence of blasphemy to those who first heard it" (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 400).

10:40–42. Safety for the sheep rested not only in the courage and connections of the shepherd but also in the conversion of new sheep. John points out that Jesus went back to the east side of the Jordan (Perea) where John had baptized in the early days of his ministry. Not all the Jews were unbelievers. Not all followed the rejecting, murderous intentions of the Pharisees. Some people were impressed that though John the Baptist had never performed a miraculous sign, yet he had promised the Messiah would come. Now here he stood and they chose to be numbered among his sheep.

Are you a sheep? Do you hear the Shepherd's voice? Do you believe the Shepherd? Do you follow the Shepherd? This world affords no security or certainty. But the heavenly Shepherd promises that his sheep will live under his protection forever. Let the words of this key verse burn into your heart and fall often from your lips: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (10:28).¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).