

The Strong Shepherd.

With so many uncertainties in our world and all the frailties we find ourselves, it is good to know there are some things – good things - on which we can count. In the last weeks, we have looked at Jesus as the true shepherd and the good shepherd. This week I want to look at him as the strong shepherd. I take that title from the words of Jesus in **John 10**, where he says that he has a hold on us that is gracious and eternal and so strong that no one can snatch us out of his hands.

Reflecting on these words this week, I remembered the famous Heidelberg Catechism begins with this question: "*What is your only comfort in life and in death?*" Here is the answer: "*My comfort in life and death is...*"

That I am not my own, but belong— body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

So much of what is taught here in **John 10** is beautifully captured in the words of the catechism. The events in **John 10** takes place about four months before the crucifixion of Jesus. In the verses we are looking at this morning, he explains that some do not understand or believe him because they are not his sheep and do not belong to him. In the same context, he explains to those who *do* believe in him that they do so because they are his sheep. They belong to him. And, as those who belong to him, they will be kept by him and *never* perish. He gives us this assurance not so that we can foolishly wander from him but so that we will be more closely drawn to him. He wants us to follow him, the true, and good, and strong shepherd of our souls.

The first thing the passage tells you is that.

I. THE GIFT CHRIST GIVES YOU IS ETERNAL LIFE.

In **verse 28**, Jesus says, *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.*

A. Christ says he gives us the *gift* of eternal life.

The idea behind a gift is a simple and familiar one. What someone else paid for, you receive for free. **Romans 6:23** sums it up beautifully, *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* In the sacrificial death of Jesus, a payment was made, and a gift was secured. The payment was for our sin. The gift is eternal life. Eternal life is not a wage paid out for good works. It is a priceless gift offered to you through faith in Christ.

Other Scriptures build on this promise and tell us that ...

B. This gift of eternal life comes with a guarantee.

Ephesians 1:13-14 says, *"And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory.*

This is so important that Scripture gives us two illustrations to stress the permanence of the gift.

1st We are sealed by the Holy Spirit. In New Testament times, a King would take a scroll and seal it. The seal would mark it as his possession and grant it his protection. God does not promise you an easy trip. He does promise a safe arrival. You are sealed by His Spirit.

2nd The Holy Spirit is the "deposit" that insures the promise. The word "deposit" describes a down payment- a first installment that would be lost if the entire transaction wasn't completed. The Holy Spirit in you becomes the seal that you are God's own possession and that you have his protection -- but more than that-- He is the first installment of all that God has promised. If you were somehow to be lost, God would have to forfeit his Holy Spirit. Of course, that can never happen. But you see, that is the point! God has gone to great lengths to say, to you who have received Christ, that you are eternally His.

The gift Christ gives his sheep is eternal life. And ...

**II. THE PROMISE CHRIST MAKES TO YOU IS
HE WILL HOLD ON TO YOU SO THAT YOU ARE NEVER LOST.**

In **verses 27-29**, Jesus says, *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.* ²⁸ *I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.* ²⁹ *My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*

Notice first what he says in **verse 27**

A. We who are his true sheep will hear his voice and follow him.

True sheep follow Jesus precisely because the gift they received through faith in him is the gift of eternal *life*. It is a new kind of life, and it changes your life. You came alive to God. No Christian is made perfect in this life— far from it - but if there is no evidence of new life and a new desire to follow Jesus, then it is doubtful that you have it.

Barry Cooper does a podcast for Ligonier called "*Simply Put.*" He did one episode on the perseverance of the Christian. He began with **Philippians 1:6**, which says: *he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.* In his comments, he said, "*In other words, what God starts, he finishes.*" Then he added this: "*But of course, for that to be any comfort, you'd need to know that you are in fact saved in the first place.*" How can we have the assurance that we have been saved? Jesus helps us when he says, *my sheep hear my voice, and they follow me.* Are you following him? Sheep are prone to wander. They follow imperfectly, but they follow. God will finish what he started, but the evidence that he has begun to work in you is that you have heard his voice, trusted in him, and begun to follow him.

As we, his sheep follow him...

B. He, as the strong shepherd, holds on to us and keeps us safe.

He says he holds us in his hands, and not only does He hold us, but the Father -- who is greater than all -- also holds us in his hands, and no one can snatch us out of or away from the hold Christ and the Father have on us. If salvation, once truly received and experienced, could be lost – well, if you could lose it, you probably would lose it! But you can't because your possession of eternal life is not found in your grasp of Him but his grasp of you.

I remember I was in the Public Library once when an issue of *Psychology Today Magazine* caught my eye. The cover article was entitled "*How do you build intimacy in an age of divorce?*" The article

began with these words; "Given one wish in life, most people would wish to be loved -- to be able to reveal themselves entirely to another human being and be embraced, caressed by that acceptance." The article explains that love like that -- intimacy like that is built on trust, and today trust is in short supply. With one out of every two new marriages ending in divorce and many others existing in name only, trusting someone to be honest and committed over the long haul is increasingly difficult. It's not that people don't want that commitment. They long for it? Sometimes some people find a real measure of intimacy and loyal love in marriage. But This morning, God in the Bible is telling us that He is the source of a love that is available for everyone -- whether married or unmarried -- whether happily married or unhappily married. His love is available for anyone who will receive it -- it is fiercely loyal and eternal. His love is capable of meeting your deepest needs for acceptance and assurance.

The whole atmosphere of your life can change when you choose to actually live by faith in the awareness of God's never-ending love. As you go through your day with an awareness that God loves you with a love that is loyal and unchanging, your fears subside. You realize that even with problems like yours, sins, failures, and weaknesses like yours, you belong to God. To the degree that you seek to live in the awareness of God's love, you feel watched over, accepted, guarded, and forgiven by God, and nothing is ever going to change that. That, in turn, empowers you to better withstand temptation, to love God and others, and to want to trust and obey God.

So there are three strong sources of security in this passage.

- 1.) The *gift*. It is a gift, and it is eternal life.
- 2.) The *promise*. It is a promise that he will hold on to you, and you will never perish.
- 3.) The *relationship*. It is a relationship that began with the initiative of God, who, having chosen you for Jesus, gave you to him.

III. THE RELATIONSHIP CHRIST HAS WITH YOU BEGAN WITH GOD GIVING YOU TO CHRIST.

Look carefully at **verse 26**: As Jesus confronts unbelievers, he says: but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. We believe -- not in order to become His sheep -- but because we are already His sheep. How then did we become his sheep in the first place? Look at verse 29: My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

What Christ is saying here is that we are his sheep and belong to him because we have been chosen by God and given by God to Christ to be his flock.

What we experience is our choice to believe in Christ. But...

A. God chose us and gave us to Christ.

In **John 6:37-39**, Jesus said: *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. 38 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.*

Later in **John 17:6**, Jesus is praying to the Father, and he says, "*I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me, and they have obeyed your word.*

B. The mystery of our selection by God is part of the security of our relationship to Christ.

Sometimes the Bible presents salvation in a very simple way. There are many places in the Bible where Jesus just invites us to come and believe and receive the gift he has to give us. But there are some places where he takes us a little deeper than that. This passage is one of them. For what Jesus adds in this passage is that anyone who comes to Christ proves, by their coming and believing, that they had already been chosen by God and given to the Christ to be His sheep.

Ephesians 1:4 tells us that God chose us in Christ *before the creation of the world...* **Ephesians 1:5** says that *in love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.* Some object that this idea of God choosing us is unfair. But it is not unfair. I saw a "T" shirt one day that said: "There is a God, but you are not Him." God doesn't have to conform to modern ideas of what is fair. He is God we are not. That said, the Bible does not present God as looking down on a neutral world of innocents and arbitrarily condemning some. It tells us that all of humanity is turning away from God. And God is graciously choosing to save. In choosing people for salvation, God acts with a love that surpasses our understanding and a higher wisdom we cannot comprehend.

When God chooses us, he does not rob us of our humanity or violate the integrity of our own choices. There is a great mystery involved in

how God choosing of us and our choosing of God is interwoven in a way that proves to be just, wise and loving. But if you see it taught in the Bible, you just have to bow your head and heart before the majesty of God and accept that there are some things we don't understand.

B. Don't let the mystery rob you of the message.

If you haven't yet received Christ as your Lord and Savior, hear his invitation to receive him as your savior and good shepherd. Maybe you think, "Who am I to receive him and salvation from him?" Well, who are you to refuse him and reject the salvation he kindly offers you? Call on him, believe in him today, just as you are. If you have done that, then live in the full awareness and enjoyment of God's enduring love for you. In human relationships, we can be disappointed, That does not happen with God. God chose you, knowing your deepest secrets, faults, and failures. He is never surprised by you or shocked. He knew you and chose you, and he gave you to Christ! God in grace gave you to Christ as one of His flock, so when the good shepherd called you - you heard his voice and came to him. It was part of God's plan and purpose and what God purposes He performs. No one whom He has given to Christ to be a part of His flock will ever be lost.

Jesus gives these promises to real people like you and me to give us the strength to keep running the good race. Imagine you are about to attempt a marathon. You have trained for it, but you haven't gone the whole distance yet. At the halfway point, your friends and families are all along the side of the course. What do they say to spur you on? "You're looking weak - doubt you will make it! You're already faltering." Is that how they encourage you to give it your best effort? No! They say, "*You can do it!*" "*You are going to make it!*" That's what God Himself is doing in these verses. He isn't just cheering us on; He is giving us His promise. He's saying, "*You can make it - I'm going to see that you do. Keep believing, keep breathing, all the way home*". We all so desperately need to actually believe, hold fast to and treasure this promise. You are guarded by God all the way to the end.

CONCLUSION

All the way – to the end. On the final page of the final book of The Chronicles of Narnia, some of the children who have been to Narnia are sad because they once again have to go back to their homeland, which is our world. But Aslan (the lion who represents Jesus) has the best news of all for them:

[Aslan spoke to the children,] "You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be."

Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often."

"No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?"

Their hearts leaped, and a wild hope rose within them.

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands—dead. The term is over: (comparing earthly life to a school year) the holidays have begun. The dream has ended; this is morning." ... the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now, at last, they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

We all so deeply need to actually believe in and treasure the promise of the gospel. ***All who believe in Christ as savior are kept secure by Christ, the strong shepherd. If you come to him you can follow him knowing you will never perish because he will never let you.*** The strong shepherd holds on to you in love.

Amen

Prayer of Response

Gracious Father, Thank you for good shepherd, who laid down his life for a sheep like me. I have truly sinned and gone seriously astray. I have so often wandered after all my own ways. And yet I hear the powerful but silent voice, the call, of Jesus and turn to him. I place my trust not in my grasp of you but in the good Shepherd' saving death, triumphant resurrection, and unwavering grasp of me. May I follow him with courageous trust. May I rest in the confidence that, because of his love and sacrifice, I will never perish. May that confidence free me to love, serve, endure, rejoice, and hope in him. Amen

