

# SAFE IN HIS HAND

John 10:22-29

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, February 8, 2009

---

“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 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” (Jn. 10:28-29).

**W**hen well-known Bible expositor James Montgomery Boice was preaching through John 10, he found a church bulletin on which someone had written, “I’m sick of Calvinism in every sermon.” The note referred to teachings associated with the name of John Calvin, also known as the doctrines of grace. What is noteworthy is that in reading Boice’s published sermons on the preceding passages, he had not mentioned Calvin or emphasized Calvinism, but had simply expounded the teachings of Jesus.

This makes the point that the doctrines for which Calvinism is known do not originate with the great Reformation teacher. We might observe that such teachings as man’s total depravity, God’s unconditional election, the definite design of Christ’s atonement, effectual grace, and the eternal security of believers were taught long beforehand by biblically-minded preachers like Martin Luther and Augustine. Nor do these doctrines depend on Calvin’s writings: they have since been taught and defended by such great teachers as John Knox, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. These doctrines were believed and spread by the early leaders of the modern missionary movement, including William Carey, Henry Martyn, David Livingstone, and John G. Paton.

But what really matters is what the Bible teaches. A study of the prophets and apostles will reveal their teaching of the doctrines of grace. Most significantly, as John 10 shows, these truths were emphasized

by Jesus himself. This is why the great evangelist George Whitefield said, “I embrace the Calvinistic scheme, not because Calvin, but Jesus Christ has taught it to me.”<sup>1</sup> The famous Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon explained, “There is no such thing as preaching Christ and him crucified, unless you preach what now-a-days is called Calvinism... Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else.”<sup>2</sup>

The doctrines known as Calvinism are therefore not some addition to the gospel that we may safely neglect or ignore, but are at the very heart of the Bible’s teaching about God, man, and salvation. Some would say, however, that while they are true these doctrines should be kept in-house. We might discuss them in seminaries, but we should not preach them to general audiences and especially not to unbelievers. But Jesus did not seem to share this view. He declared the truth of man’s lost condition, God’s sovereign grace, and the final security of believers to all who would hear and even in the presence of his enemies. In fact, Jesus’ preaching of these doctrines was most explicit in his most public sermons, such as in John 6 and John 10. We must therefore regard them as essential to Christian faith and vitality and humbly receive them from the mouth of the Lord.

## SINFUL MAN’S SPIRITUAL INABILITY

**I**n chapter 10, John advances his timeline of Jesus’ ministry from fall to winter, with Jesus now appearing at the Feast of Dedication, which recalled God’s blessing in restoring the temple in the year 164 B.C. The Jews had been controlled by the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes, who had defiled the temple with pagan idols. Under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus, the Jews expelled the Greeks and restored the temple. Jewish people continue to celebrate the Feast of Dedication today under the name of Hanukkah.

John points out that it was winter, which described not only the weather but also the chilly winds of unbelief that were blowing in Jerusalem. “Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon,” John says, referring to the great pillared porch that surrounded the temple courts, when “the Jews gathered around him”

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Arnold Dalimore, *George Whitefield*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970), I:406.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1883, reprint n.d.), I:88.

(Jn. 10:23-24). The Greek word for “gathered around” (*kukloo*) indicates that they surrounded and pressed in on Jesus. In Revelation 20:9, the same word is used for a military siege. This indicates the intensity and spirit of their question: “How long will keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly” (Jn. 10:24).

In fact, Jesus had not publicly named himself as the Messiah in so many words. It seems that he did not do this because so many people understood the Christ, or Messiah, to be a political and military leader who would overthrow the Roman rule. In private conversation with his disciples, Jesus had plainly identified himself as the Messiah (see Jn. 4:26; 6:69). But in public speech, he seems to have avoided this title due to the popular misunderstanding.

In his answer to the question asked of him, Jesus expounds one of the chief teachings of the doctrines of grace, namely, sinful man’s spiritual inability. The Bible teaches that man’s problem is not just that he has yet to decide to turn from sin. Man’s problem is that because of sin he is spiritually dead and thus beyond the point of being able to do anything for his own salvation. As Paul wrote, “You were dead in the trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). There is no hope for a dead man unless he is miraculously raised to life; likewise, apart from God’s saving grace, sinful man is not able to believe.

Jesus made this point, first, by insisting that he had revealed himself quite clearly: “I told you, and you do not believe” (Jn. 10:25). While Jesus had not publicly claimed the title of Messiah, his teaching had nonetheless made quite clear who and what he was. Jesus had openly identified himself as the Son of God (5:25-26; 9:36) and Son of Man (5:27; 6:53, 62), the latter of which was a clear Messianic title. He had referred to himself as “the bread of life” (6:35, 48) and “the light of the world” (8:12). Jesus repeatedly claimed to be sent from heaven (6:58; 8:42) and he took the divine name, “I am” (8:28, 58). These and other teachings were clear enough for his disciples to believe on him as the Christ; the fact that the religious leaders did not believe reveals their moral perversity and spiritual inability.

Jesus makes the same point about his “works,” which refers especially to his miracles: “The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me” (Jn. 10:25). Jesus’ miracles fulfilled many prophecies and could only be accounted for by the fact that he was

the Messiah. This was the chief function of the miracles: to bear witness to Jesus as the Christ. But Jesus' miracles only hardened the hearts of his unbelieving observers, yet again demonstrating the sinful bondage of their hearts and minds.

Jesus culminated his reply by stating the cause for their unbelief: "You do not believe because you are not part of my flock" (Jn. 10:26). This is a significant statement. Most people would put this backward: "You are not part of my flock because you do not believe." But Jesus insists that their unbelief was caused by their not being his sheep. Unbelief is not the cause of man's separation from God, but the result and mark of man's separation from God. They did not believe because their nature was darkened and hardened in total depravity. Moreover, since Jesus states that they were not elect in himself – "you are not part of my flock" – they remained unregenerate. This does not reduce their responsibility for unbelief. D. A. Carson points out: "That they are not Jesus' sheep does not excuse them; it indicts them."<sup>3</sup>

## SALVATION BY GRACE

Jesus' answer furnishes some valuable insights for believers. It reminds us that we are not members of Christ's flock because we believe; we are not saved because of our faith. We do not save ourselves by believing in Jesus, but God saves us through the gift of faith (Eph. 2:8-9). We believe because we have been saved – because we have been graciously entered into Christ's flock by God's sovereign mercy. Indeed, we could not possibly believe until we had been born again, that is, until the Holy Spirit had changed our hearts so that we became sheep who hear Christ's voice. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (Jn. 10:27). It is because Jesus calls us "my sheep" that he says that we hear his voice and follow. To be sure, one must believe to be saved. But our salvation does not rest upon our faith, but rather on God's grace in Christ, who calls his sheep to faith.

Consider the question, why does a Christian believe whereas another does not? Is it because the Christian is more spiritual by nature, more

---

<sup>3</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 394.

willing or more able in and of himself or herself? Not according to the Bible! Christians were just as sinful and spiritually dead as anyone else prior to being born again (see again Eph. 2:1). It is only by God's sovereign grace in election that Christ's sheep believe and are saved.

When we speak of salvation by grace, we mean that sinners receive eternal life as a free gift from God. Jesus states this plainly, "I give them eternal life" (Jn. 10:28). This implies that prior to being saved we do not have eternal life. This is why we are not able to believe until we are first born again (see Jn. 3:3). Being a gift, salvation is free. A gift is not something we claim as a right; God is not obliged to save sinners, but out of his grace he gives eternal life. James Boice comments: "If it were earned, it would be wages; if it were merited, it would be a reward. But eternal life is neither of these. It is a gift, which means that it originates solely in God's good will toward men."<sup>4</sup> "For by grace you have been saved through faith," Paul writes. "And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

When it comes to the doctrines of grace associated with Calvinistic theology, it would be hard to find a more concentrated teaching than John 10:27-28. Jesus says, "My sheep," which refers to divine election, for he goes on to say, "My Father has given them to me" (Jn. 10:29). Next, they "hear my voice" – this is effectual calling unto saving faith. It is by Christ's power in the gospel that we hear and believe. "I know them," he continues. This corresponds to our justification; through faith in Christ we are forgiven and accepted into the divine love. "They follow me," Jesus adds. Here is sanctification, as Christ leads his sheep in paths of righteousness (Ps. 23:3). Then he states, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish." Here is glorification: Christ's sheep will "dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Ps. 23:6).<sup>5</sup> Here, then, are the doctrines of grace as taught by Jesus: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (Jn. 10:27-28).

---

<sup>4</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:799.

<sup>5</sup> Taken from Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 284.

Salvation by grace is the greatest news one could ever hear. We cannot earn salvation, since no good works can erase the guilt of our sins. We cannot buy salvation, since we have nothing to offer to God. We do not have a right to eternal life, since our whole race fell into death by the sin of Adam. Yet we can still have eternal life: by receiving it from Jesus as a free and unmerited gift of God's grace.

## SALVATION THROUGH FAITH

**H**ow, then, do we receive this gift? The answer is through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul explains: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus... to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:23-25).

John 10:27-28 gives a short summary of the meaning of saving faith. We may say that faith involves three elements, the first of which is *the faith of the hands*. Jesus says, "I give them eternal life" (Jn. 10:28), and faith receives his gift. Faith does not reject the gift of eternal life or resent the fact that we cannot earn our own way to heaven. Faith gratefully accepts what God offers us in Jesus Christ.

But there is also *the faith of the ear*. This was Jesus' point in answering the Jews' question. They demanded that he tell them plainly if he was the Messiah. Jesus replied that if they had the ears of faith, they would already have believed his teaching and miracles. The ears of the unconverted are dead to Christ's voice, but the ears of his sheep hear and believe. "My sheep hear my voice," he says (Jn. 10:27).

Finally, there is *the faith of the foot*. "And they follow me," Jesus adds (Jn. 10:27). This is where our claim to faith is tested. Do you say you believe in Christ? Then are you following him? Do you obey God's commandments? Do you strive to copy Jesus' example? Is your character being conformed to his – in humility, love, and holiness?

In Jesus' day, shepherds would mark their sheep with a special notch on the ear. But Jesus places two marks on his sheep: on the ear and on the foot. In the same way, what you believe and how you live identifies whether you are one of Christ's sheep or not. If your hands

have received God's gift of eternal life, if your ears have heard and believed, and if your feet are following after Jesus, you may be confident that you belong to Jesus and have eternal life.

## SAFE IN HIS HAND

Those who truly belong to Christ not only possess eternal life, but they also have the blessing of knowing they can never lose it. "I give them eternal life," Jesus said, "and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (Jn. 10:28).

Given a clear statement like this, it is hard to understand how so many Christians can be taught that a true believer can lose eternal life. By its very definition, eternal life cannot be lost. As everlasting life, it lasts forever. It is true that false disciples may lose their salvation, for the simple reason that they never really had it. But those who truly believe – who have received God's gift into their hands and are marked on the ear and foot through a living, obedient faith – cannot lose a life that is eternal.

Eternal life is a true gift from God. A gift that is taken back was never truly a gift. And since God cannot change, his gifts cannot be revoked. "The gifts and the calling of God," Paul says, "are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). Therefore, if you are sure that you have God's gift of eternal life, you can be equally sure that you always will.

Since we are prone to doubt, Jesus expresses this as a promise that he is obliged to fulfill. "They will never perish," he says. A Christian may lose many things in this world: money, position, worldly esteem and comfort, and unless Jesus should return first, we will all lose our mortal lives. But we will not lose our eternal life. Since Jesus has been raised from the dead and has entered into his eternal heavenly reign, there will never be a time when he will not uphold this promise. "He holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever," says the writer of Hebrews. "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:24-25).

A World War II bomber was hit by flack fire during a mission. The pilot had trouble steering, so he asked the rear gunner how bad it was.

The gunner replied, “There’s a three by five hole in the left horizontal stabilizer and elevator.” “Will we be able to make it home?” he asked. “No sweat,” the pilot replied. But they barely made it, skewing and skidding as they landed. When they got out and the pilot examined the damage, he screamed: “When you said three by five I thought you meant inches, not feet!” They really had not been safe but were in mortal danger all along. Leon Morris, who tells the story, comments:

A good deal of our earthly security is like that: it is far from being as secure as we imagine. Sometimes things turn out all right for us and sometimes they don’t... But the wonderful thing about eternal life is that it is absolutely secure. Jesus holds his people in his own firm grasp, and they can trust his assurance that they will never perish.<sup>6</sup>

In John 10:29, Jesus gives one more reason why his sheep are eternally secure: the power of God the Father in keeping safe his own. It is as if Jesus, knowing our need of encouragement, wraps his own saving hand with the omnipotent hand of God the Father: “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.”

It is self-evident that nothing is stronger than God. So if we are placed in his hand, we can never be taken out. It is true that we are weak, but how strong God is! It is true that we are prone to error and stumbling, but God is faithful to bring us back and lift us up. We are beset with many enemies and dangers, but God is greater than them all, so no one can “snatch us” out of God’s hand.

When Jesus says that “no one” can snatch believers, what is included in this “no one?” The answer is everything. Time is included, having no effect on God. Death is included, since God is the maker and giver of life. Sin, too, is unable to snatch a true believer from eternal life. God defeated sin by the death of his Son on the cross. What about earthly powers – kings, generals, and captains of industry? They are part of this “no one,” since God rules over them. What about spiritual powers, like Satan and his minions? The Bible shows that Satan can go no further in his wicked schemes than God allows him. Jesus states that God will not allow anyone to pluck his sheep

---

<sup>6</sup> Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 390.



from his hand. Even we ourselves are included in this “no one,” with all our foolish, sinful, rebellious tendencies: nothing we can do can pluck us from God’s strong hand. Paul, therefore, was able to rejoice in the full assurance every believer can have in the unchanging grace of God. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul asked. He answered: “I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

For this reason, though we are beset with many troubles and woes, every Christian has every reason to rejoice all the time. As the hymn says: “Heaven above is deeper blue / earth around is sweeter green... Since I know, as now I know / I am his, and he is mine.”<sup>7</sup>

## HOW CAN I BE SURE?

**T**his wonderful teaching of God’s saving grace for Christ’s sheep leaves only one question: How can I be sure I am one? The reality is that some who profess faith in Christ do not persist to the end. According to the Bible, this proves that they never truly were saved. John says of them in his first epistle, “They were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us” (1 Jn. 2:19). So how can I be sure I am not one of those who fall away?

The classic contrast is between Peter and Judas. Both were disciples, at least outwardly. One persisted in faith until death, but the other, Judas, betrayed Jesus and lost his soul. So how can I know I am a Peter and not a Judas?

We cannot tell merely by an outward affiliation with Christ and his church, since this was true of both Peter and Judas. But we read on more than one occasion of Peter making a good confession of faith in Christ, while from Judas we hear nothing. So have you made a public profession of faith that has been recognized as genuine by the church? Or are you only lingering in the company of God’s people, and like Judas never committing yourself to Christ?

---

<sup>7</sup> George W. Robinson, “Loved with Everlasting Love,” 1890.

Furthermore, we cannot tell the difference by observing which one fell into sin, for they both did. John tells us that Judas was greedy and frequently stole from the disciples' moneybag (Jn. 12:6). Peter was often at the center of error and division, usually because of his pride. So what was the difference? The difference was that Peter was eager to repent of his sin and his life was increasingly shaped by his discipleship to Christ. Are you repenting of known sins? Are Jesus' teachings shaping your attitudes and thoughts in new and godly ways?

Lastly, we also cannot tell a difference merely by the fact that Judas betrayed Jesus, since Peter did as well. Judas betrayed Jesus to the religious authorities, but Peter denied Jesus three times on the night of his arrest. The difference is that Peter returned whereas Judas went off to die in despair. Are you returning to Christ, if you have failed or denied him? How important it is that you do.

Ultimately, we can only be sure of our eternal safety through a present and living faith in Jesus. Jesus says that his sheep are those who accept God's gracious gift of salvation, hear his voice, and follow him. Flawed and foolish though you may be, does this describe you? If not, then now is the time to commit yourself to Jesus. If this does describe you, you have eternal life and will never perish. Saved in Christ, you are safe forever, and no one will ever snatch you from his mighty hand. What great incentive could you ever have to live for his glory and serve whole-heartedly in his cause?