

The Gospel of John (64); Jesus, at the Feast of Dedication (1)

Introduction:

Let us turn in God's Word to John 10:22ff. Here before us is the seventh and last formal dialogue in this Gospel narrative. It begins with verse 22 and continues through the end of the chapter with verse 42. Seven is a significant number for this Gospel writer. There are seven "signs" (miracles) of Jesus recorded. There are seven major discourses of Jesus in this Gospel. There are seven formal "I am" statements of Jesus in this Gospel in which the Lord Jesus declared His deity.

Now in this 10th chapter of John's Gospel we have been considering our Lord's presentation of Himself as the Good Shepherd of Israel. On the one hand, Jesus is the Good Shepherd of Israel, in that He is God Himself who led His people through the Old Testament. But in another sense, Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the Good Shepherd, whom the prophets had long before proclaimed would come to gather and save His people--His sheep.

Jesus spoke of His own role as the Shepherd of His sheep. His sheep represented the people who belong to Him, those whom God had chosen from eternity and had given to His Son to redeem from their sin. Jesus had contrasted Himself as the Shepherd, or owner of the sheep, with a hireling, who cared about himself above his concern for the sheep. Jesus had also spoken much regarding the identity and nature of His "sheep" that is, His elect, who hear His voice and come unto Him in faith. When a wolf comes to threaten the sheep, the hireling runs in order to save himself. The good shepherd does not flee, but lays down His life in order to save His sheep.

Now as we said last week, it may be that the "wolf" in verse 12 may refer to false teachers who would ravage the Lord's sheep, if the shepherd failed to intervene. This reminded me of what **Charles Spurgeon** (1834-1892) once wrote regarding his conflict with those who opposed his ministry. He declared that it was easier to deal with enemies outside the church than to be attacked by the Lord's people in the church. He declared, "I would rather be attacked by wolves, rather than by sheep."

Now in the passage before us the Lord continues to speak of His sheep, even though the time and setting of His words before us is significantly different from the context that we have been considering. Let us begin reading with verse 22.

²²Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. ²³And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch. ²⁴Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly."

²⁵Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me. ²⁶But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. ²⁷My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. ²⁸And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. ³⁰I and My Father are one."

Let us first consider...

I. The setting of our Lord's words (10:22f)

We read of the place and time of this teaching session of our Lord in **verses 22 and 23**.

²²Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. ²³And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch.

The setting of the dialogue in the earlier verses of this chapter was in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles. That feast was the longest Jewish festival of the year set forth in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament; it lasted seven days. It took place at the end of the Jewish lunar year, signaling the beginning of the new year. Because of the difference between the Jewish lunar calendar and our own Gregorian calendar, the time of the feast varies from year to year. This year the Jewish people will observe the Feast of Tabernacles, which is also known as the Feast of Booths, or Succoth (or *Sukkot*), from October 14th until the 22th.¹ Our Lord had arrived at Jerusalem at the beginning of this festival, which is recorded in John 7:1ff. The events of John 7, 8, 9, and through 10:21 transpired in a handful of days at that time. But now we read in John 10:22 that the time had advanced somewhat, from the Feast of Tabernacles to the Feast of Dedication. The Feast of Dedication, which is an 8 day celebration, will be observed by the Jewish people this year from December 22nd until the 30th. The onset of this feast takes place 75 days after Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, which was at the onset of the Feast of Tabernacles. And so, the time advances in our text between John 10:21 and John 10:22, by about 67 days, or so.

The Feast of Dedication is more commonly recognized by the name of Hanukkah, or, the Feast of Lights. It is a feast that is not prescribed in the Old Testament, for it was not established until after the Old Testament Scriptures had been written. The feast commemorates the rededication of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem that occurred in 165 BC. The Jewish people had long lived under oppression to the Seleucid Empire that was led at that time by Antiochus Epiphanes IV (215-164 BC). But the Jewish people rose up to regain their independence and secure their religious liberty under the leadership of the family of Judas Maccabeus. Their period of independence, the Maccabean Period, which is also called the Hasmonean Period, lasted from 167 BC until 63 BC, when Palestine was conquered by Rome. The Jews would celebrate the onset of their political and religious liberty with the rededication of the temple that had been desecrated. , The highlight of this 8 day Feast of Hanukah was the nightly lighting of the seven-branched menorah in the temple in Jerusalem.

The Feast of Dedication was the celebration of the memory that “the sovereign God, against all human probabilities, wrought deliverance for His people, brought them out of darkness, and enabled them to offer real worship.”²

The time of this episode, from John 10:22 until 10:42, is in the winter months of Judea. Two months had passed since our Lord’s declaration in the temple that He was the good Shepherd. Only about 3 or 4 months were remaining of our Lord’s public ministry, which would end with His arrest and crucifixion at the time of the spring Passover celebration. But it was here that our Lord was again at the temple mount, in the area of Solomon’s porch, which was at the east entrance of the temple court. Here we read that the Jewish leadership challenged Him once again. It would seem that they took up where they had left off a couple of months before.

II. The interchange between the Jewish leaders and Jesus (10:24-30)

We first read of...

A. The challenge of “the Jews” (10:24)

“The Jews” took this occasion to “surround” Jesus and confront Him with the question that had long troubled them. **Verse 24** records, *“Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, ‘How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.’”* The ESV translates this verse in this way:

So the Jews *gathered around him* and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” (John 10:24 ESV)

¹ Last year this feast was about 3 weeks earlier from September 24 until October 1, 2018.

² Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), pp. 475.

Here it would seem that our NKJV better suggests the intent and hostility of these “Jews” toward Jesus. **“Then the Jews surrounded Him”, or “encircled Him.”** By the way, let us remember that in the Gospel of John, most of the time when John makes reference to “the Jews”, it is a reference to hostile Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. This is the case here. The intention of the Jewish leaders was not to discover the truth regarding Jesus, but to find fault with Him, even a basis to accuse and condemn Him. The language suggests that

The Jews are not seeking for clarity in order to worship Him without restraint; rather they want to obtain from Him an unambiguous statement that would provide an adequate basis for their attack.³

I thought that **Richard Lenski** (1864-1936) best set the stage:

Here Jesus suddenly appears in their midst; He is alone except for His disciples; now they can have it out with Him. By a concerted action they surround and enclose Him, meaning that He shall not get away. No friendly multitude is at hand to support Him and to stay their hand. Jesus is suddenly face to face with His bitter enemies, who are now bound to force the issue. The moment is charged with the greatest potentialities.⁴

And **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) described the setting this way:

They *came round about Him*, to tease Him; He was waiting for an opportunity to do them a kindness, and they took the opportunity to do Him a mischief. Ill-will for good-will is no rare and uncommon return. He could not enjoy Himself, no, not in the temple, His Father’s house, without disturbance. They came about Him, as it were, to lay siege to Him: *encompassed him about like bees.*⁵

These Jewish leaders posed a challenging question and then gave Him a command, even an insistent demand. They confronted Him, **‘How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.’** They came pretending that they were sincerely seeking the truth from Him, but not directly revealing their motives. But their countenance and attitude must have betrayed their true desire. They wanted Him to tell them “plainly.” Ryle stated, “‘Plainly’ here does not mean in plain language, and easily understood, but openly, boldly, unreservedly, and without mystery.”⁶

If our Lord had answered them directly, they would have a basis to accuse Him before the Roman authorities. Everyone knew that the Christ would be a king, who would assert his authority over the Jewish people. This would have certainly resulted in conflict, providing the cause to not only discredit Him, but destroy Him. They asked, “Art Thou or art Thou not the Christ?” If He says, “I am,” the stones will fly.⁷

B. The Lord responded by declaring that He had already told them. (10:25)

We read in **verse 25**, “Jesus answered them, **“I told you, and you do not believe.”** Actually the Lord had not declared *explicitly* to them that He was the Messiah. He had done so to the woman of Samaria. She had said to Him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When He comes, He will tell us all things.” Then Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am He” (John 4:25f). Jesus had also declared plainly to the man who had been born blind that He was the Messiah. Jesus had asked the man who could then see, “Do you believe in the Son of God?” The man answered, “Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?” And then Jesus said to him, “You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you” (John 9:35-37). Our Lord had also accepted the confession that He was the Christ from His own disciples. But He had not overtly declared that He was the Messiah to these Jewish leaders.

³ Donald Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 392.

⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, **The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel** (Augsburg Publishing, 1942), p. 749.

⁵ Matthew Henry, **Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible**, vol. 4 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 1036.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 2 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), p. 235.

⁷ Lenski, p. 750.

But though He had not overtly claimed to be the Messiah before these unbelieving Jewish leaders, He had given ample evidence before them of His true identity. He had indeed “told” them, for He said, ***“The works that I do in My Father’s name, they bear witness of Me.”*** He personified His works as if they were a personal, verbal witness to His true identity. His miracles had testified or had born witness that He was indeed the promised Messiah.

At the same time, all of His ministry, both words and deeds, pointed in one direction: in that sense He *had* told them. Even His works, done in the Father’s name as the revelation of the father’s will and the embodiment of the father’s power, taken cumulatively, testify that the Father has sent Him.⁸

But Jesus said to them, “I told you, ***and you do not believe.***” The problem was not that there was insufficient evidence to substantiate His true identity. The problem was their unbelief—they had no faith. “They had pretended that they only doubted, but Christ tells them that they did not believe. Skepticism in religion is no better than downright infidelity” (Matthew Henry).

C. The Lord stated the reason for their unbelief (10:26)

Jesus declared to them their unbelief, but then He gave the reason of their unbelief. We read in **verse 26**, ***“But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you.”*** The reason that they did not believe was because they were not of His sheep. Had they been of His sheep, they would have believed.

Here we may draw a conclusion that the “sheep” in John’s Gospel is not a metaphor of converted people directly, but to the elect people of God, of all those God ordained to save from fallen humanity. ***All the elect are God’s sheep.*** God the Father sent His Son into the world to gather together His sheep, all of the ones that He had purposed to save from their sin, and secure for them eternal life.

By definition, how does the Word of God describe the divine election people unto salvation? Here is a definition that is consistent with the teaching of the Bible:

God has chosen specific persons from fallen humanity to be recipients of His salvation, having chosen them before creation in Christ, not based on any foreseen condition or response of them, but solely due to His own good pleasure according to the purpose of His will.

Several words of clarification may be helpful. First, election follows the understanding of man’s total depravity, or total inability to come to God. Left on his own, even after having been instructed, admonished, persuaded, and pleaded with, man would still choose to reject God’s rule over him, for he is spiritually dead, both incapable and unwilling to do the things God has commanded him. Man’s salvation must originate from outside of himself. It originates in God’s election. God then takes action to save the ones that He chose to save.

Second, there is no indication in the Scriptures of a reason that God chose the ones He chose, passing over the others, other than it was good in His sight and it was in accord with His purpose to glorify Himself in His grace. He chose them, purposing to love them with an everlasting love.

Third, election is unto salvation. Although certainly God’s election of some means His passing over others, hence, a doctrine of reprobation, nevertheless, election is always presented positively in the Scriptures unto salvation. Persons are not elected to damnation; persons are elected to salvation.

The First Baptist Confession of 1644/46 sets forth this subject of God’s election.

We affirm, that as Jesus Christ never intended to give remission of sins and eternal life unto any but His sheep (John 10:15; 17:2; Eph. 5:25, 26, 27; Rev. 5:9); so these sheep only have their sins washed away in the blood of Christ: The vessels of wrath, as they are none of Christ’s sheep, nor ever believe in Him, so they have not the blood of Christ sprinkled upon them, neither are partakers of Him: And therefore have all their sins remaining upon them, and are not saved by Christ from any of them under any consideration whatsoever; but must lie under the intolerable burden of them eternally. The truth of this appears unto us

⁸ Carson, p. 393.

by the light of these Scriptures compared together, Hebrews 12:24; 1 Peter 1:2; Hebrews 3:14; Matthew 7:23; Ephesians 5:6; 2 Timothy 1:9; John 8:24. (First London Confession of Faith with an appendix by Benjamin Cox, 1646.)

I was reminded of the **New Hampshire Baptist Confession** of 1833. It stated the matter in its article entitled, *Of God's Purpose of Grace*:

We believe that Election is the eternal purpose of God, according to which he graciously regenerates, sanctifies, and saves sinners; that being perfectly consistent with the free agency of man, it comprehends all the means in connection with the end; that it is a most glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, being infinitely free, wise, holy, and unchangeable; that it utterly excludes boasting, and promotes humility, love, prayer, praise, trust in God, and active imitation of his free mercy; that it encourages the use of means in the highest degree; that it may be ascertained by its effects in all who truly believe the gospel; that it is the foundation of Christian assurance; and that to ascertain it with regard to ourselves demands and deserves the utmost diligence.

Fourth, to be precise in our speaking of these matters of God's election, we should distinguish between the doctrines of election and predestination. Although they are often popularly used synonymously, they are related, but distinct doctrines. Predestination speaks of God's design for the ones He elected. He first elected those He purposed to love and save. They only are His "beloved", as no one else is, although He is loving to all because He is a loving God. He then predestined His elect that they would become conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29), to become His adopted sons (Eph. 1:5), and that they would be to the praise of His glory (Eph. 1:11).

There are many passages of Scripture that declare this doctrine of election. Here are a few of them:

Romans 9:9-15. "For this is a word of promise, according to this season will I come, and Sarah shall have a son. And not only so; but Rebecca also having conceived by one, even by our father Isaac, for the children being not yet born, *neither having done anything good or bad*, that *the purpose of God according to election* might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth, it was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. Even as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For He said to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

Ephesians 1:4. "Even as *He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and without blemish before Him in love."

2 Timothy 1:9. "Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but *according to his own purpose and grace*, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began..."

Acts 13:48. "And as the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of God: and *as many as were ordained to eternal life* believed."

1 Corinthians 1:26-29. "For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. ²⁷But *God has chosen* (elected) the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and *God has chosen* (elected) the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; ²⁸and the base things of the world and the things which are despised *God has chosen* (elected), and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, ²⁹that no flesh should glory in His presence.

Only the elect of God will believe, for God only works His grace in them so as to regenerate them—giving them spiritual life. This new birth places within them the desire and ability to believe God's Word so as to believe on God's Son, so as to be saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. Christians owe all that they have from God to His sovereign grace that he had purposed from

eternity. If it were not for the reality that God had chosen (elected) us unto salvation, we would have been as these Jewish leaders to whom Jesus declared, “***But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you.***”

Donald Carson (b. 1946) wrote of this matter:

What then can explain the obtuseness of so many hearers? It is that they do not belong to Jesus’ sheep. It is not just that His own sheep do hear His voice, that He knows them, and that they follow Him (points made in verses 1 through 18 and here repeated), but that those who are *not* His sheep do *not* hear His voice, that He does *not* know them, and therefore they do *not* follow Him. Neither Jesus nor John means to reduce moral responsibility of the opponents in the slightest. That they are not Jesus’ sheep does not excuse them; it indicts them. But the predestinarian note ensures that even their massive unbelief is not surprising; it is to be expected, and falls under the umbrella of God’s sovereignty.⁹

In contrast to these unbelieving Jews who are not His sheep, Jesus then spoke of the responsiveness of His sheep. **Verse 27** reads, “***My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.***” This speaks of the effectual call of God that is extended to His sheep when in His timing and purpose He brings them to faith in Jesus Christ. The Lord calls His sheep. They hear His calling of them. They come to Him and begin to follow Him. Here are the words of **John Calvin** (1509-1564):

He (Christ) assigns a higher reason why they do not believe either in his miracles or in his doctrine. It is, because they are reprobate. We must observe Christ’s design; for, since they boasted of being the Church of God, that their unbelief may detract nothing from the authority of the Gospel, he affirms that the gift of *believing* is a special gift. And, indeed, *before that men know God, they must first be known by him*, as Paul says, (Galatians 4:9). On the other hand, those to whom God does not look must always continue to look away from him. If anyone murmur at this, arguing that the cause of unbelief dwells in God, because he alone has power to make *sheep*; I reply, He is free from all blame, for it is only by their voluntary malice that men reject his grace. God does all that is necessary to induce them to believe, but who shall tame wild beasts? This will never be done, till the Spirit of God change them into *sheep*. They who are wild will in vain attempt to throw on God the blame of their wildness, for it belongs to their own nature. In short, Christ means that it is not wonderful, if there are few who obey his Gospel, because all whom the Spirit of God does not subdue to the obedience of faith are wild and fierce beasts. So much the more unreasonable and absurd is it, that the authority of the Gospel should depend on the belief of men; but believers ought rather to consider, that they are the more strongly bound to God, because, while others remain in a state of blindness, they are drawn to Christ by the illumination of the Spirit. Here, too, the ministers of the Gospel have ground of consolation, if their labor be not profitable to all.

Arthur Pink wrote of this:

“But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, *as I said unto you.*” To what is our Lord referring? When had He previously avowed that these Jews were not of God’s elect? When had He formerly classed them among the reprobates? The answer is to be found in chapter eight of this same Gospel. There we find this same company — “the Jews” (see verse 48) — antagonizing Him, and to them He says, “Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word” (verse 43). This is strictly parallel with “ye believe not” in John 10:26. Then, in John 8, He explains why they could not “hear his word” — it was because they were “of their father the devil” (verse 44). Again, in the forty-seventh verse of the same chapter He said to the Jews, “He that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.” Strictly parallel is this with John 10:26. They “heard not” because they were not of God: they “believed not” because they were not of His sheep. In each instance He gives as the reason why they received Him not the solemn fact that they belonged not to God’s elect: they were numbered among the reprobates.

⁹ Carson, p. 393.

John 10:27 actually sets forth three of the five doctrines of grace (Calvinism), which is the heart of Reformed theology. First there is the doctrine of *election* conveyed in the words, “*My sheep.*” Secondly, there is the doctrine of the *effectual call* (i.e. irresistible grace) in the words, “My sheep *hear My voice.*” And lastly, the doctrine of the *perseverance of the saints* is declared in the words, “*and they follow Me.*”

Now in order for our Lord to convince these Jewish leaders that they were not of His sheep, the Lord sets forth distinguishing characteristics of His sheep. In setting forth these characteristics and blessings of His sheep, His opposers could be certain of their spiritual condition and their terrible destiny. And so, in our Lord setting forth these positive qualities of His sheep, He showed these Jewish leaders their lost condition. And so, *what distinguishes the Lord’s sheep?*

(1) **Jesus said that His sheep “hear My voice.”** His people recognize His voice calling them. They know Jesus Christ to be their Shepherd, their Savior, their Provider, and their Protector, that He owns them. They delight in hearing His voice and enjoy sitting at His feet and hearing Him teach them and hear His words of promise and assurance to them. Of course they hear Him for He would have them hear Him. “The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the LORD has made them both” (Prov. 20:12). And this is true of both physical hearing and spiritual hearing. We hear Him because He opened our spiritually deaf ears enabling us to hear His voice, calling us by name. These Jewish leaders knew nothing of this.

(2) **Jesus said of them, “and I know them.”** The Lord distinguishes His sheep, His elect, from all others. Paul wrote, “Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are His’” (2 Tim. 2:19). The Lord Jesus has His sheep on His heart. They are dear to Him. Now God is loving to all because He is love. But He does not have all humanity dear to His heart. He has set His love upon His people, an everlasting love. He shows forth great patience upon all the human race, but with regard to those who are not His sheep, His longsuffering toward them is aggravating the intensity of His wrath upon them, which He will unload upon them on the Day of Judgment. But of His own, His elect, God loved them with an everlasting love for He regarded them from eternity to be in union with His Son, so even when we were in the depths of our sin, in our ignorance or even in our defiance toward Him, He had compassion upon us, even as His wrath lay upon us. He loved His sheep with an everlasting love and therefore had pity upon them in their sin and purposed that He would do everything needful, while remaining true to Himself and His holy nature, in order to redeem them from their sin, even to the infinite degree of love in sending His Son to endure His wrath that was upon them. He loved us—His sheep—with an everlasting love, and therefore He moved to save us from our sin. As Jeremiah could say, so every one of us who know the Lord may confess of our God: “The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying: ‘Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you’” (Jer. 31:3). These Jewish leaders knew nothing of this.

(3) **Jesus said that His sheep “follow Me.”** His sheep submit to His leading them, to His guidance and direction. They joyfully hear His voice and they most willingly desire to do His bidding. **Matthew Henry** commented on this:

The word of command has always been, *Follow Me*. We must eye Him as our leader and captain, and *tread in His steps*, and walk as He walked—follow the prescriptions of His word, the intimations of His providence, and the directions of His Spirit—*follow the Lamb* (the *dux gregis*—*the leader of the flock*) *whithersoever He goes*. In vain do we *hear His voice* if we do not *follow Him*.

These Jewish leaders knew nothing of this.

Now in **verse 28** we read that our Lord Jesus gives eternal life to His sheep, that is, to His elect. “***And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.***” Perhaps this verse should lead us to answer some very basic but important questions.

(1) **What is “eternal life”?**

Probably most people think of the term, eternal life, as simply describing the unending existence of Christians—we will live through eternity. But the idea of eternal life may be understood more broadly and deeply than this rather simple thought. Eternal life is the central theme of our Lord’s teaching in the Gospel of John. But in the Synoptics the primary message of the Lord Jesus was the kingdom of God. And when considered carefully, the biblical concept of eternal life in the Gospel of John carries different emphases than the concept of eternal life that is set forth in the Synoptic Gospels. Let us consider this matter by relying heavily on the treatment of this subject in the classic biblical theology of **George Eldon Ladd** (1911-1982) entitled, *A Theology of the New Testament*.¹⁰

First, what is the nature of eternal life that is set forth in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Ladd presented this under the heading of “Life in the Synoptics.”

The Synoptic Gospels also speak of eternal life; but here, as in Judaism, it is life in the Age to Come. When the rich young ruler asked how to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17), he was thinking of the life of the resurrection, and Jesus answered him in the same terms. This eternal life is the life of the Kingdom of God (10:23), which will be inherited in the Age to Come (10:30; see also Matt. 25:46). The coming of the Son of Man will effect a separation of men: the wicked will go into eternal punishment and the righteous into eternal life (Matt. 25:46). In several other places in the Synoptics, the simple “life” is used of this eschatological (i.e. end times) blessing (Matt. 7:14; Mark 9:43, 45). In the Synoptics, the idiom “Life” and “eternal life” in its redemptive significance is always a future eschatological blessing (Luke 10:25).¹¹

Consider these verses that substantiate the description of eternal life in the Synoptic Gospels:

Matthew 19:29. “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and *inherit eternal life*.”

Luke 10:25. “And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do *to inherit eternal life*?’”

Luke 18:18. “Now a certain ruler asked Him, saying, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do *to inherit eternal life*?’”

Matthew 25:34. “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, *inherit the kingdom prepared for you* from the foundation of the world.’”

Matthew 7:13f. “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. ¹⁴Because narrow is the gate and difficult is *the way which leads to life*, and there are few who find it.”

Matthew 18:8. “If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you *to enter into life* lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire.”

Matthew 25:46. “And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous *into eternal life*.”

Each one of these references depicts eternal life as something to be received in the future, in that it will be inherited by the disciples of Jesus Christ at the resurrection on the Day of Judgment. And so, in the Synoptic Gospels eternal life is primarily temporal in nature; it is a linear matter in that it is unending existence in the kingdom of God, but it is yet to be received or inherited on the day of the resurrection.

¹⁰ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (William B. Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 254ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

Second, what is the nature of eternal life that is set forth in the Gospel of John? Ladd sets this forth in several sections, which are entitled as follows: (1) Eternal life in John: Eschatological, (2) Eternal life: Present, (3) The Nature of Eternal Life: Knowledge of God, (4) Knowledge in John, and (5) the Vision of God.

Now we do not have the time available to us to explore all of these matters, but what this does suggest to us is the idea of eternal life in John's Gospel is both different in nature and emphasis than what is set forth in the Synoptic Gospels. Of course these two views of eternal life are not in conflict with one another, but complement each other. Each presentation gives to us a more full and blessed picture of what God has freely given us and promised us in Jesus Christ. But for the enhancement of our understanding and of our appreciation of this gift of eternal life, let us consider briefly some of John's teachings regarding the eternal life that we have in Jesus Christ.

a. In John's Gospel eternal life is eschatological¹² in nature, in other words, it is life in the Age to Come; however, according to the Fourth Gospel, those who become Christians have already entered the promised Age to Come. In other words, life in the Age to Come in the Synoptics is primarily a future prospect to be inherited, but life in the (eschatological) Age to Come in John's Gospel is a present experience but that will be more fully enjoyed upon the resurrection from the dead. Here are Ladd's words:

While eternal life is eschatological, the central emphasis of the Fourth Gospel is not to show men the way of life in the Age to Come but to bring to them a present experience of this future life. Here is a teaching that is not found in any explicit form in the Synoptics, that life of the Age to Come is already imparted to the believer. The purpose of Jesus' mission was to bring men a present experience of the future life (10:10). He came down from heaven to give life to the world (6:33), to satisfy the world's spiritual hunger and thirst (6:35). This life is not a quickening of any innate powers resident in man; it is the impartation of a new life, mediated through Christ; and those who do not "eat His flesh and drink His blood" cannot share life (6:35). This life is mediated both through Jesus' person and His words. His very words are life (6:63) because His words come from the Father who has given Him commandment what to say, and God's commandment is eternal life (12:49-50).¹³

b. The emphasis in the Synoptic Gospels of eternal life is an unending existence with God (quantity), but in John's Gospel eternal life is primarily an emphasis on the richness of life before God (quality). Or to put it in another way, in the Synoptics eternal life is horizontal—over time, but in John's Gospel eternal life is vertical—with emphasis on the superlative nature of that life.

c. Eternal life in the Gospel of John gives emphasis on *knowing God* through Jesus Christ. Here are Ladd's comments:

In John knowledge is experiential relationship. An intimate, mutual relationship exists between the Father and the Son; Jesus in turn knows His disciples, and they know Him, and in knowing Him they also know God. "I know My own and My own know Me, as the Father knows Me and I know the Father" (10:14-15). The thing that sets apart Jesus' disciples from the world is the fact that they know Him while the world does not (17:25). Because of the intimate knowledge between the Father and the Son, He is able to mediate to His disciples the knowledge of God (14:7)...

Knowledge of Jesus includes knowledge of the meaning of His mission. He is the One sent by God (17:8, 25); He is the 'I am' who comes to speak the word of God (8:28); He and the Father mutually indwell each other (10:38), yet the Son is completely dependent on the Father (17:7).¹⁴

¹² Eschatological means having to do with the end times. There is a sense in which we are presently living in the "end times", or "the last days" (cf. Heb. 1:1f); this is realized eschatology. But in another sense eschatology speaks of the future realization of God's promises with the second coming of Jesus Christ, the resurrection, and the judgment of mankind, and the creation of the new heavens and new earth, and the eternal state.

¹³ Ibid, p. 257.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 262.

(2) What is it to “never perish”?

To perish is *not* to experience annihilation, as the doctrine of some teach, like the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah Witnesses. They believe that the souls of the damned will be extinguished, cease to exist. This doctrine was also taught by John Stott, who was an ‘evangelical’ leader in the Church of England. But the Bible teaches that the Lord will banish and punish all in everlasting punishment in hell, the only escape for anyone is through repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ.

Here again is **Matthew Henry** wrote of the escape from perdition that the Lord grants His sheep:

They shall be *saved from everlasting perdition. They shall by no means perish for ever*; so the words are. As there is an eternal life, so there is an eternal destruction; the soul not *annihilated*, but *ruined*; it’s being continued, but its comfort and happiness irrecoverably lost. All believers are saved from this; whatever cross they may come under, they shall not *come into condemnation*. A man is never undone till he is in hell, and they shall not go down to that. Shepherds that have large flocks often lose some of the sheep and suffer them to perish; but Christ has engaged that none of his sheep shall perish, not one.¹⁵

(3) What is meant by our Lord’s words, “neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”?

The Lord has put His name and His power at stake, with this firm promise. As our good Shepherd who is all-powerful, He has committed Himself to see these promises for us fulfilled. No thing or no one can change His commitment to us and no one can defeat or frustrate His power toward this end—the salvation of our souls. Again, here is **Matthew Henry**:

His own power is engaged for them: *Neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand*. A mighty contest is here supposed about these sheep. The Shepherd is so careful of their welfare that He has them not only within His fold, and under His eye, but *in His hand*, interested in His special love and taken under His special protection (*all His saints are in Thy hand*, Deut. 33:3); yet their enemies are so daring that they attempt to pluck them out of His hand—*His* whose *own* they are, whose *care* they are; but they cannot, they shall not, do it. Note, those are safe who are in the hands of the Lord Jesus. The saints are *preserved in Christ Jesus*: and their salvation is not in their own keeping, but in the keeping of a Mediator. The Pharisees and rulers did all they could to frighten the disciples of Christ from following Him, reproving and threatening them, but Christ saith that they shall not prevail.¹⁶

We then read in **verse 29** further words of assurance of our Lord for His sheep. Jesus said, **“My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand.”**

Not only is the power of the Lord Jesus committed to our salvation, but God the Father is also committed to secure us in our eternal relationship with Him. He owns us. We are in His hand, and there could be no safer place in all of creation. Perhaps His disciples who were present heard of Jesus’ commitment to them, but the Lord appeared before them in His incarnation as one in His weakness. Could He indeed keep us? But in order to assure His people of their security, He declared that the power of His Father was also committed to this end. This is security for the true believer, even eternal security to the one who has truly fled to Jesus Christ as His only place (city) of refuge from the Avenger, God Himself.

I felt that I must cite the words of **John Calvin** (1509-1564) on this verse:

It is an inestimable fruit of faith, that Christ bids us be convinced of our security when we are brought by faith into his fold. But we must also observe on what foundation this certainty rests. It is because he will be a faithful guardian of our salvation, for he testifies that our salvation is in *his hand*. And if this were not enough, he says that they will be safely guarded by the power of *his Father*. This is a remarkable passage, by which we are taught that the salvation of all the elect is not less certain than the

¹⁵ Matthew Henry, vol. 4, p. 1037.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 1038.

power of God is invincible. Besides, Christ did not intend to throw this word foolishly into the air, but to give a promise which should remain deeply axed in their minds; and, therefore, we infer that the statement of Christ is intended to show that the elect are absolutely certain of their salvation. We are surrounded, indeed, by powerful adversaries, and so great is our weakness, that we are every moment in imminent danger of death; but as He who *keeps what we have committed to him* (2 Tim. 1:12) is *greater* or more powerful *than all*, we have no reason to tremble as if our life were in danger.

Hence, too, we infer how mad is the confidence of the Papists (i.e. Roman Catholics), which relies on free-will, on their own virtue, and on the merits of their works. Widely different is the manner in which Christ instructs his followers, to remember that, in this world, they may be said to be in the midst of a forest, surrounded by innumerable robbers, and are not only unarmed and exposed as a prey, but are aware that the cause of death is contained in themselves, so that, relying on the guardianship of God alone, they may walk without alarm. In short, our salvation is certain, because it is *in the hand* of God; for our faith is weak, and we are too prone to waver. But God, who has taken us under his protection, is sufficiently powerful to scatter, with his breath alone, all the forces of our adversaries. It is of great importance for us to turn our eye to this, that the fear of temptations may not dismay us; for Christ even intended to point out the way in which *sheep* are made to live at ease in the midst of wolves.¹⁷

The last declaration of our Lord in His initial response to these Jewish leaders is found in **verse 30, “I and My Father are one.”** Both God the Father and His Son were joined together in their mutual intention and purpose to deliver His people unto their blessed eternal state. His sheep would be safely brought into His fold, where they are eternally secure. And one more quote of **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714):

And so, our passage assures us that have heard His voice and have followed Him and do follow Him that we are secure in our salvation. No force on earth, no effort of demons or satan, no faults or failures of our own will frustrate God’s design for our everlasting life with one another in His presence. Praise God for His unspeakable gift in Jesus Christ.

If this be so, then *none* (neither man nor devil) is *able to pluck them out of the Father’s hand*, not able to deprive them of the grace they have, nor to hinder them from the glory that is designed them; not able to put them out of God’s protection, nor get them into their own power. Christ had Himself experienced the power of His Father *upholding* and *strengthening* Him, and therefore puts all His followers into His hand too. He that secured the glory of the Redeemer will secure the glory of the redeemed. Further to corroborate the security, that the sheep of Christ may have strong consolation, He asserts the union of these two undertakers: “*I and my Father are one*, and have jointly and severally undertaken for the protection of the saints and their perfection.” This denotes more than the harmony, and consent, and good understanding, that were between the Father and the Son in the work of man’s redemption. Every good man is so far one with God as to concur with him; therefore it must be meant of the *oneness of the nature* of Father and Son, that they are the same in substance, and equal in power and glory... If we should altogether hold our peace concerning this sense of the words, even the stones which the Jews took up to cast at Him would speak it out, for the Jews understood Him as hereby making Himself God (v. 33) and He did not deny it. He proves that none could pluck them out *of His hand* because they could not pluck them out *of the Father’s hand*, which had not been a conclusive argument if the Son had not had the same almighty power with the Father, and consequently been one with Him in essence and operation.¹⁸

May each of us declare as Paul,
“I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded
that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.” (2 Tim. 1:12)

¹⁷ John Calvin, **Calvin’s Commentaries**, Vol. XVII (Baker Book House, 1993), pp. 415f.

¹⁸ Matthew Henry, vol. 4, p. 1038.
