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What is Christmas All About?

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to John chapter 10.

Some things in life are really confusing. Some time ago in London, there was a 76-year-old man by the name of Bill Baker who married a woman named Edna Harvey. Nothing so far out of the unusual; seemingly, their previous spouses had passed away, and they were both remarried to each other—no problems. The slight hiccup, however, was that this woman happened to be Bill Baker's granddaughter's husband's mother. So there was already a family connection there, and utter confusion followed. According to the granddaughter, whose name was Lynne, she said, "My mother-in-law is now my step-grandmother, my grandfather is now my step-father-in-law, I'm now married to my uncle, and my own children are my cousins." You can go work out those connections later, but truly, some things in life are really confusing.

Let's not get confused about Christmas this year, friends. The earliest recorded celebration of Christmas we know of is December 25th, the year 336. It wasn't until some 300 years after Christ that we have any record of a memorial of his birth recognized. You see, ancient peoples were far less concerned about birthdays than we are today. They didn't notably remember any particular day for Jesus' birth. Yet we have inherited a tradition, a Christmas tradition from the past, that we can make good use of as followers of Christ. So may we not be confused about the significance of the birth of our Lord and remember rightly who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish for God.

I want to draw your attention to a particular verse we find in John 10, verse 11, which reads, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." So we want to consider the Lord Jesus Christ this Christmas Lord's Day as our good shepherd who came into this world to give his own life as a ransom for his people. This first statement of Jesus makes up what is known as one of the seven "I am" statements in John's Gospel, recorded only in John's Gospel. The first of these we find is in John chapter 6, where Jesus says, "I

am the bread of life," speaking of the reality that only in Jesus can humanity find true satisfaction, meaning, and nourishment for their souls.

In John chapter 8, a couple of chapters later, Jesus will then say, "I am the light of the world," after which he will miraculously heal a man who was born blind to illustrate the greater spiritual point that we are all, the world over, in spiritual darkness because Christ is the light to drive out that darkness in our hearts. A few more chapters forward, in John chapter 11, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." We know in that chapter, John 11, he then resurrects a man named Lazarus who had died and been placed in a tomb four days earlier, demonstrating Jesus' authority over life and death itself.

A couple more chapters on, in John 14, he will say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," for Christ is not one of many ways to God, as many wish to believe, but he is the exclusive way to God. He is the promised Messiah for the world, the only way we can come to know God. One more chapter on, in John 15, Jesus says, "I am the true vine." He illustrates the fact that true spiritual life is sustained only in him, and that we, as the branches, must be grafted into Christ, who is the vine.

In the context of John 10 here this morning, we find these two further "I am" statements. The first one is in John 10, verse 9, where Jesus says, "I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture." Jesus utilizes a common Near Eastern village scene of sheep inside a sheep pen. The only way the sheep can go out into the field to feed in the pasture during the day is that they first pass through the gate—the only legitimate exit point to come out of the sheep pen and into the pasture. Well, spiritually, the same is true of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is only through him that we may enjoy union and communion with our God. Only by coming to Jesus can we know and enjoy the life of God now and for eternity. So Jesus is the door we must enter through to enjoy the pastures of God's bountiful forgiveness, love, and grace that is in him. We think of the words in 1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus," that one who bridges the gap for us.

But connected to the "I am the door" statement of Jesus in John 10 is this "I am" statement we find in the text of interest to us this morning: "I am the good shepherd." We want to consider Christ as the good shepherd. Not only is Christ the door of the sheep, but he is the good shepherd who leads the sheep, who feeds them, who cares for them, and who will, as we will see, die for them. What Jesus is saying here is that as God the Son incarnate—truly God yet truly man—he has been commissioned by the Father to enter into the world as a man to become the means by which God may save his people from their sins and the judgment to come. The nature of this relationship is so close, so intimate, that it can be compared to that of a faithful shepherd towards his sheep.

When it was pouring down with rain last night and this morning, I am sure John McIntyre was thinking about his sheep outside. He was thinking in his mind, "How are my sheep going to be okay?" Well, it's not even in comparison, in a way, to the care that Christ has and his thoughts concerning his people. Now, the overarching context of Scripture, Jesus identifying

himself as the good shepherd, is a shorthand way of stating his messiahship. We should associate Christ calling himself a good shepherd with his messiahship. That Jesus is the Messiah means he is the one whom the people of God, from the beginning of life outside the garden, wherein we fell into sin, expected would come to make things right. A classic example of this is in the prophet Ezekiel. In his writings, we read of this expectation of the Messiah, "As a shepherd who cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep. So I will care for my sheep, and I will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day." You see, God promised that he himself would come to shepherd his people. It was only when Jesus came that we truly understood what that meant as we hear our Lord Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd."

Christ then is the good shepherd, for God is the central actor on the stage of redemptive history. The story of the Bible is this complete, perfect, whole story about a perfect creation that has been ruined by God's image bearers. As we transgressed his law, we chose autonomy; we chose to go our own way, and the harmony of creation was ruptured. Man fell into sin, estranged from his Creator and under his judgment. But for the purposes of God's glory and praise, his redemptive purposes in the Messiah proceeded as God willed. The story of the Bible is the story of Jesus coming; it's the story of the good shepherd we especially remember at Christmas.

So let's briefly consider three ways we see Christ Jesus as the good shepherd in this passage. The first point is this: He is not a hired hand but the faithful good shepherd. The first thing we need to realize is that Jesus did not come to offer competition with others for the shepherding rights of his people. There are many false shepherds who have stepped forward over the centuries, presenting themselves as men to follow, men to gain eternal wisdom from. These are false shepherds—be it Muhammad, the Buddha, Guru Nanak, Confucius, or the Dalai Lama. These are names by the wayside; these are wolves deceiving sheep, the blind leading the blind—shepherds of the darkness and not of the light. For there is none but Jesus Christ, given by God among men, who can say that he is rightfully man's shepherd.

It is not simply that Jesus is a shepherd; I suppose we could say in a way that Moses was a shepherd, and we could say that David was a shepherd. But only Christ can say he is the shepherd who comes from God. Furthermore, Christ is the good shepherd and not simply some hired hand called in to cover another on paid leave. I was sent a quote from a friend recently, and the quote came from the late investor and businessman Charlie Munger. He said, "Show me the incentive, and I will show you the outcome." And that's just it. The hired hand has no real incentive for the ultimate welfare of the sheep. He is there on Monday, maybe on Wednesday, maybe on Friday, but then he's gone, off worrying about different problems. But not Christ; he is attentive to the welfare of his people.

I assure you, if you would but come to Christ, you will find in him the fullness of God's love and enduring peace through trial, tribulation, loss, and grief. Most of all, you will find him a saviour from the penalty of your sins, and he alone can nourish your soul. In the following verses of John, Jesus will say exactly this from verse 12 onwards. Read it with me: "He who

is a hired hand is not a shepherd; he is not the owner of the sheep. When he sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know my own, and my own know me."

You see, the Lord Jesus lived his whole life with the names of his people in his mind. As he passed through the waters of baptism at the inception of his ministry, as he wandered in the wilderness fasting and was tempted by Satan, as he surrendered to persecution and even the cross, the names of his people were inscribed on his heart, as were the names of the tribes of Israel on the breastplate of Aaron, the high priest of old. Jesus is the good shepherd because he is the only shepherd. As we see him in the manger at Christmas, there lay the ultimate sign and example of God's love for his children whom he came to save, given later meaning in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son."

The second thing we need to observe in the passage is this: Jesus is not just any shepherd; he is the good shepherd. As another preacher once said of Christ, he is the good shepherd—good up to the highest point of goodness. Part of what Jesus is doing in this section of John's Gospel is forming a polemic; that is, he is forming a rebuke against the false teachers in Israel of the time, particularly a group known as the Pharisees. In the preceding chapter of John, you'll find that Jesus has called the Pharisees spiritually blind and still in their sin. Instead of feeding God's people his word and watching over them, they were exploiting them. They placed a great yoke of the law upon people, putting them into a works-based salvation that saves no one, creating religiosity, creating tradition, but no heart of faith, no real love for God.

It was as Jeremiah had spoken long before in Jeremiah 12:10: "Many shepherds have ruined my vineyard; they have trampled down my field; they have made my pleasant field a desolate wilderness." But Christ is the good shepherd, you see, in whom the sheep have a sure protector, enabler, and Savior. It's said that in some Near Eastern contexts, a shepherd will sleep in the gateway of the pen where they house their sheep so that any intruder wanting to get at the sheep must first cross over the shepherd. Such is his care for them. Christ behaves in this way towards us, with such a deep desire to ensure that all his children receive all his benefits, and none will fall to Satan's deceptions and lies. None will be lost to judgment. Jesus said in John 10:29, "My Father, who has given them, (that is, the sheep) to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand."

So there is security in him because he is a good shepherd. Have every confidence in God's word, Christian, for we have a faithful shepherd of our souls. He promises that he will never leave nor forsake his children, that he will always go before us, even to the end of the age, that he will build his church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. As goes the old hymn, "Faithful shepherd, feed me in the pastures green; faithful shepherd, lead me where thy steps are seen. Hold me fast and guide me in the narrow way; so with thee beside me, I shall never stray."

The third and final heading is this: He is the good shepherd because he lays down his life for the sheep. Now we get to the true reason that we know our Lord is a good shepherd: it is because he gives even his own life. During the short three and a half years of Jesus' public ministry, on a number of occasions, he taught that he was here, he was born, in order that he might ultimately die for the sins of his people in accordance with the purposes of God. He will even say of his impending death, "No one has taken it away from me, but I lay it down of my own initiative." Such was his desire to be obedient to the Father.

It's not simply that Jesus was willing to risk his life to protect the sheep. You think back to King David before he was anointed to be the next king of Israel. He was watching over his father's flocks, and he would risk his life to defend his father's sheep. But the greater David, our Lord Jesus, will even give his life to be judged in the place of his people for their sins. This is how we move from the manger in which he was laid to the cross upon which he was nailed. You know the text well, and John records the crucifixion of Jesus in this way: "So then he handed him over to them to be crucified. They took Jesus, therefore, and he went out bearing his own cross to the place called the place of the skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between. Pilate also wrote on an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, 'Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews.'"

But what happened there on the cross was far more than physical agonies, for we remember this was a death for his sheep. After all, death before Christ came into the world and sheep long after Christ departed from this world—sheep of all ages in all times. This was more than a physical death but a spiritual death. And so we ask, how can I know that this death can redeem my soul from sin? Listen to how the apostle Peter put it: "He himself, that is Jesus, bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sin."

You see, it is what happened to Jesus spiritually in judgment on that cross that matters most. There, upon the cross, our God, who is all-knowing, all-omniscient, all-omnipresent, he declares the beginning from the end. He really and truly placed the believer's sin on Christ, and Christ there bore the curse for our fallenness and divine law-breaking.

But you challenge this notion, and you say, "Are we really in need of saving? Do we really need such an extent of a saviour? Do we not just need more of a helping hand? Someone to prompt us along the way? Do we really need a sin bearer?" The scripture says, "All of us like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way, but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him."

Allow me to give you a few ways you have broken the law that I might prove to you that you do need this saviour, this good shepherd. The first way you have broken the law is through your transgression of God's revealed moral law as found in the Old Testament. We call this the Ten Commandments. I need not list them all. The first two: "You shall have no other gods before me," and "You shall not make for yourself an idol of any likeness of what is in heaven above or under the earth." But you say to me, "Oh, I haven't worshipped idols." Are you so sure?

For our hearts, as the preacher once said, are idol factories producing false gods of our lifelong servitude—money, wealth, prestige, pleasure, lusts of the flesh, entertainment. Friends, we have built great and high altars of worship that we build our lives upon. We sacrifice not to the golden calf as the children of Israel did, but to those idols of our own times and our own creation. Our guilt is known to the Lord, and you have never once loved the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind as the law requires of his image bearers. We are guilty, friends. We are all corrupted; we are all under wrath; we are all accursed and rightly led to the judgment on the last day before our Creator, who is holy and righteous. The Bible says in Hebrews 9:27, "Inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment."

But in steps Christ, the good shepherd, to deliver, and his call goes out. The call is to repent and believe in the gospel, for the child of Christmas is the born Saviour. He is the law keeper to save law breakers. He is the one to whom you must turn and call upon. Jesus said in John 6:37, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out, for I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." Friends, Christ has made atonement; the work is finished. We can cease working for our salvation; we can cease trusting in ourselves. We can believe that the good shepherd has come and that in his life, in his name, we may have life, for that is why he came.

I conclude in this way: The famed preacher D.L. Moody told a story of a friend traveling through some eastern countries. He met up with a certain shepherd—probably not a sheep farmer in the way we think of a sheep farmer, but in this Near Eastern context, he might have 50 sheep or so, with a much more intimate sort of care for his flock. Speaking with this shepherd, the friend of D.L. Moody said to him, "Let me put on some of your clothes. Let me take your clothes and your crook stick, and I will go out into the field and call your sheep by name." This man had names for all his different sheep. So the friend then walked out into the field wearing this shepherd's clothes and his crook stick, and he called out to the sheep, this particular sheep by name. All the sheep scattered; they fled. They did not know this stranger's voice, though he be in the appearance of the shepherd.

So he said to the shepherd, "Will none of them follow me when I call them?" The shepherd then said to him, "Yes, sir, some of them will; the sick sheep will follow anybody." You see, the healthy sheep would only follow the call of the master. One of the comforting things to the preacher, the evangelist, and the ordinary Christian who shares the good news about Jesus with others is guaranteed results. What do I mean by that? Not guaranteed that all will believe, and we mourn that fact, but guaranteed that the sheep will hear the master's voice. Jesus said himself in John 10:27-28, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I will give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them from my hand." Such is the good shepherd that we remember this Christmas.
