

The Shepherd's Call

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 00] There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, he has a demon and is insane. Why listen to him?

Others said, these are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind? At that time was the Feast of Dedication. It took place at Jerusalem.

It was winter and Jesus was walking in the temple in the colonnade of Solomon. 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.

Jesus answered them, I told you and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me. But you do not believe because you are not part of my flock.

My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. And no one will snatch them out of my hand.

[1 : 00] 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. I and the Father are one.

And if we turn to this passage, I would like to look especially with you at verses 3 to 5 and also 27 to 28 for a short time this morning.

If we read again at verse 3, And again at verse 27 where Jesus said, My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me and I give them eternal life.

And they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who gave them to me is greater than all and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

And I and the Father are one. I'm going to look at this today under what we hope will be a short series of studies on following Jesus.

[2 : 25] It's such an important concept in itself. We very frequently speak about following Jesus. Sometimes we refer to those who are newly converted as having to, having begun to follow Jesus.

So following Jesus is an important concept. It's important for us in terms of our experience spiritually. It's important in terms of the teaching of Scripture, especially in the Gospels which refer to it directly.

But what is following Jesus? What is involved in following Jesus? How do you begin to follow Jesus? What's involved in continuing to follow Jesus once you've begun?

How does following Jesus come about? What does it consist of? Is it possible to stop following Jesus? What are the benefits of following Jesus?

What do we lack if we're not among those who follow Him? So many questions with regard to the matter of following Jesus. And we're beginning with this passage because in this brilliant imagery that Jesus here presents of the shepherd and his sheep, you find so much there that's relevant spiritually to our following of Jesus as his disciples or as his people.

[3 : 45] Now the situation behind the imagery here is one of the shepherd and the sheep. And it's important maybe just to pick up a few points on what lies behind the way Jesus is speaking here.

In the practice of the times where a shepherd and his sheep in that relationship between them would carry out some of what's actually mentioned here in the passage.

For example, at the beginning here it speaks about the shepherd coming for the sheep in the morning and leading out his own sheep by name. And the practice there would have been that shepherds would get together, probably still the practice in some cases.

Shepherds would get together and for the security of their flocks, they would combine a number of flocks together overnight. Within a walled enclosure with an opening where there wasn't a physical door, but one of the shepherds usually would take it in turns to sleep in the doorway.

So that if anybody came and approached and tried to get in, they would have to get through the shepherd lying in the doorway. And by the same token, the sheep wouldn't be able to get out because the shepherd was blocking the opening.

[4 : 56] And that was the practice where all the flocks of these shepherds, however many there'd be, came together. And that's where they would actually share together in looking after the sheep overnight.

But in the morning, the shepherds would come, each one, to call out his own flock. And what Jesus is saying is, the gatekeeper opens, the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

In other words, the shepherd would come, and he would call his own flock. And the flock, because they know the voice of the shepherd, they would respond. Out of all the other flocks gathered together, the flock belonging to the shepherd who was calling them would come out and follow him and leave the rest until their own shepherd came along.

So that's the situation that gives us help in explaining what the imagery is really about. And it helps us to understand why Jesus is using this imagery to explain to us or to present what is true about following him, how it comes to be taken up, and what's involved in it.

So I want, first of all, just to say a few words about the shepherd's call. A shepherd comes to his own sheep and calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

[6 : 20] The sheep hear his voice, and he calls them. And later on in the passage, verse 27 there, My sheep hear my voice, and they know me, and I know them, and they follow me.

So you've got a correspondence there between the voice of the shepherd, which is known by the sheep, and the sheep then coming out and following him after he has called them. And the shepherd's call, the Lord's call, addresses us as hearers of the gospel.

Keeping this in very simple terms, although there's a lot of profound theology behind the imagery that Jesus is using, as is common anyway in John's gospel. It's amazing just how much profound truth can be conveyed by simple terms, and John is certainly the expert in doing that.

So the shepherd's call is, first of all, through the gospel. The shepherd calls through the gospel. Let me just ask the question, whose voice is heard in the preaching of the gospel?

Well, the obvious answer to that in ordinary times is a human voice, the preacher's voice. But is that the only voice? Is that really the only thing that's heard in the preaching of the gospel?

[7 : 38] Is there any other voice that's heard in the preaching of the gospel? And the answer to that is yes. When the gospel is being preached, as we're seeking to do, in being true to the scripture, when it's the scripture that's being set out by way of exposition of its meaning and presentation of the truth that scripture contains, that scripture presents us with, that is the Lord's voice that's being heard.

The word of God, the scripture, is the word of God. And we have to actually hold on to that most strenuously and zealously. Don't ever be tempted by any suggestion that the written word is not actually truly, properly the word of God.

God has actually spoken out this word. He has breathed out this word in the way in which Paul writes to Timothy, 2 Timothy, about it. All scripture is given by inspiration of God.

It's breathed out by God. So you can actually take it that this word today, this written word, it must never be less for us than the actual word of God.

It has come from him to us. It's addressing us. It's his word. And when we preach as we seek to do that word, when that word is taken and sermonized, and we try and bring out its meaning and present its truth in a way that we hope is cogent and relevant, that is also God's voice.

[9 : 12] You are hearing God's voice through the preaching of the gospel. Some people, of course, would take issue with that. Some people would say it's ridiculous to think that you're actually hearing the voice of God when a preacher is preaching the truth to you.

But then God's own word really makes it clear that that actually is happening. Take, for example, that great passage in Romans, chapter 10. And these are important things for us to take with us and to remember because unless you're actually persuaded that this is God's voice addressing you, there's going to be something missing from your hearing, from your quality of hearing, from your attentiveness in hearing and mine.

In Romans, chapter 10, at verse 14, Paul is asking the question here. Well, in verse 11, he says, Scripture says everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.

And for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek. The same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. What a wonderful statement that is. There are no restrictions there. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But then it says, But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed?

[10 : 33] And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?

As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news. You can see the combination of elements there that combine the hearing of God's voice with the preaching of the gospel.

So it's quite proper and it's no exaggeration as a preacher of the gospel for me to say to you today, you are actually hearing God's voice.

God is addressing you. It's no mere human voice, though it is a human voice. Because by the nature of what God has himself instituted and put together and ordained and established through the preaching of the gospel, his voice is heard.

And it's God, therefore, who is saying to you today and calling to you today, come and follow me. Come to me and I will give you life. And if you haven't yet come to Jesus, this is the voice that's addressing you today.

[11 : 44] You don't come to Jesus just because a minister has told you, just because a minister that has been placed over you as a congregation is now addressing you in a certain way and presenting the truth to you in such a way that appeals to you to come to Jesus.

And I hope we're always doing that, appealing to you to come to Jesus, because the gospel appeal is so important and so free. But it is God, ultimately, that's making his appeal through the preaching of the gospel.

As Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 5, where he speaks there about the reconciliation that God has brought about through Jesus' death on the cross. We are, he says, ambassadors for Christ.

As though Christ is beseeching you, appealing to you through us, be reconciled to God. And so when the preaching of the gospel seriously and earnestly and lovingly appeals to people to be reconciled to God, in the ultimate, in the highest sense, that is God making his appeal through the preaching of the gospel.

So here's a very relevant question. Whose voice are you hearing today? Who did you come here today to listen to? And I hope your answer to that is not, we came to listen to you, or at least not exclusively.

[13 : 14] I hope everyone here has come to this building today to worship the Lord with the intention of hearing the Lord's voice, of hearing God speaking to them through the scriptures, through the preaching of the gospel, to hear the shepherd's call, the shepherd's calling out to you to come and follow him, to be part of his flock.

But sadly, many people actually hear the gospel but don't follow. Remember what Jesus himself said in chapter 5 here of John, where he said in chapter 5 at verse 39, Jesus was speaking as he was there during his ministry to people who kept refusing him.

And in John chapter 5 at verse 39, he says, you are searching, this is to the Jews who are listening to him, you are searching the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life.

Now Jesus didn't mean they were wrong in thinking that. Of course, they weren't wrong in thinking this was the scriptures that God had given them. It is they, he said, these scriptures that bear witness about me.

Yet, you refuse to come to me that you may have life. See, there's the important distinction that Jesus is making. You're searching the scriptures, he said to them, because you're right in thinking that God has given us these scriptures so that eternal life can be set out before us.

[14 : 50] Yet, you will not come to me that you might have life. You see, there's a hearing of the gospel that remains just as a surface hearing but on the part of some they don't respond in order to come to Jesus by coming to Jesus personally for themselves.

So that's secondly, the shepherd's call is not just in the gospel. How do we come really to follow Jesus? Well, there is what we know of in our theology as effectual calling.

Most of you will have known your catechism from a young age, I'm sure, if not, shorter catechism 31, it deals with what's called effectual calling.

Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the gospel.

You see, that is God's work it's saying there and the aim and the result of that work is to embrace Jesus Christ. In other words, the call of the gospel as a general call as it goes out and God is very sincere about this.

[16 : 09] When he's offering life to you in the gospel, he's not being insincere about it and the fact that there's such a thing as an effectual call where God works in someone's heart and people's hearts to enable them to embrace Jesus Christ doesn't at all destroy or interfere with the seriousness and with the honesty and with the sincerity of God in offering life in the call of the gospel.

When God says whoever shall call on the name of the Lord will be saved as we read in Romans, he is being honest about that, he's being sincere about that. He's not going to be short of fulfilling that in the experience of those who come to call out to him, the experience of those who receive him. But you see, this effectual calling is the work of God and is done by convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ and renewing our wills.

What does that result in? What is that, what's the outcome of that? It is that he persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ. He persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ as he's freely offered in the gospel.

Freely offered in the gospel, not offered in such a way as is only for an elite portion of the people. He's freely offered in the gospel. That means God is actually saying to you today in the offer of the gospel, Jesus is here for you in his death and in his resurrection, in all the fullness of his person and of his salvation.

[17 : 48] He's here for you if you take him. He's here for you in your need. He's here for you in your greatest need, the need of salvation. And there's nothing wrong with saying, have you prayed that God will open your heart?

You want to be saved. There's only one way of being saved through Jesus Christ. Some people might suggest to you, well, you can't even begin to pray until you're already converted.

You can't even think about embracing Christ until God has done this work in your heart. And of course, there's a sense in which that's true. But the Bible never encourages us to actually say, I can do nothing about praying and seeking salvation until I'm sure that I've got Christ.

If you lack salvation today, call upon the name of the Lord. Come to him and say, Lord, you promised me in your word that whoever calls on the Lord shall be saved.

I want to be saved. Please open my heart. Enlighten my mind. Convince me of my sin and my misery. Renew my will. Give me, Lord, what I cannot give myself.

[19 : 07] And therefore, persuade me and enable me. Bring to me this energizing summons of effectual calling so that I will be saved, so that I'll be amongst your flock, so that I'll have eternal life, so that I won't be lost.

He persuades and enables. So you see, it's quite right for us, even accepting the fact of effectual calling and what it is and what the Bible says about it, still quite right in preaching the gospel to ask and to present the question, have you come to Jesus?

Have you really come to himself? You hear his call in the gospel. You're hearing his call today. It is the Lord himself whose voice you're hearing.

But then the question is, have I responded to that by actually coming to Jesus? Have I taken him as he's freely offered in the gospel? Am I content with that hearing at the level of just hearing his voice calling me and not actually responded in the way that I'm responsible for?

Because remember, the gospel, friends, is addressing our responsibility. And it's our responsibility to come to Christ, to believe in Christ, to repent of sin, to turn from sin and to turn to God and to accept his righteousness.

[20 : 40] And as all of these things come together today, as you hear the shepherd's voice, what is it to you? As you hear the shepherd calling you to follow him, how are you going to respond to that?

Some of you will have responded already. Some of you are already in Christ. Some of you know what it is to follow the shepherd. And you're wanting others to follow the shepherd too. And you're praying for others to follow.

But today, if that's not the case for you, here is God making his appeal through the preaching of the gospel. What is it that I have not done in order that you may have life?

And you'll say, well, nothing, Lord. And then you'll say, well, follow me. Accept me. Receive me. Because it's a free offer.

It doesn't come in any way that you need to pay for. Christ has paid the price. And that offer is genuine on God's part today.

[21 : 49] So there's the shepherd's call. You've heard his voice today. You're hearing his voice through the preaching of the gospel. Now he's asking you, what are you doing with this?

Where's your response? What kind of response is it today? So secondly, following Jesus is the next point.

The shepherd's call through the gospel, and there's such a thing as the shepherd's call, effectually to persuade and to enable us. But what is following Jesus? See what Jesus speaks here in verse 3. To him, the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. And when he is brought out his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

See, his sheep are not actually being driven out. That's an important element in the imagery there to note. Sometimes, I'm sure most of us here will be aware of crafters with sheep, but very often you'll find the sheep being driven in the craft towards the gate or whatever.

[22 : 57] Here is a shepherd leading them. He goes out before them and they follow him. He calls them. They know his voice, so they follow him. And that's illustrative of what happens in the case of Christ's people.

They know his voice. They hear his voice. They listen to his voice. They know it's his voice. They know he's their shepherd, so they follow him out.

They follow him out as he leads them. And as we begin to follow Jesus and respond to the call of the gospel, so that continues day by day.

The shepherd keeps on going before his sheep. The shepherd always is ahead of us. The shepherd, through his word and spirit, his word and spirit through which we come to receive him and to be persuaded that he is our Savior, that he must be our Savior.

Well, that same word and spirit is used to teach us as we follow him, as we continue to follow him. It's a wonderful thing. That's the wonderful thing about one of the wonderful features of the word of God, the written word of God.

[24 : 07] Not only does God use it as the spirit blesses it to you to enable you and to persuade you to embrace Christ, but it also is what God uses to feed you once you've come.

to direct you, to guide you, to teach you, to add to what you already know in your experience of salvation. This gospel, this word, by his spirit, God will keep using.

So the shepherd always proceeds ahead of the sheep. Now, obviously, that means a number of things, one of them being that it's important that we don't wander from the path that follows the shepherd.

shepherd. It's important that we keep our eye on the shepherd, that we don't take our eye off him.

Because if we stop and go into some sort of lay-by and we take our mind off the shepherd, then we get into trouble.

We become backslidden. We actually lose sight of the importance of following him. Our hearts grow cold. We lose sight of the way.

[25 : 15] All sorts of things happen when you actually turn aside and don't keep the shepherd in view. Sheep are notoriously prone to wander off by themselves. And that's part of the aptness of the description that Jesus is using here of the shepherd and his sheep.

Every skillful shepherd knows that he has to keep calling the sheep, keep encouraging the sheep.

That's what Jesus does. Sometimes the shepherd, too, has to rebuke the sheep or drive them back into line, into following when they wander aside.

Jesus does that, too. But you need to keep him in your view. You need to keep, in other words, you need to keep yourself under his word, under the direction and teaching of his word. So you keep on praying and you keep on listening to the gospel and you keep on reading your Bible.

Some people today would tell you that's just being very simplistic. Well, maybe so, but it's very basic to your spiritual health. And when you start abandoning that or losing sight of the importance of that, you've got a problem.

You've got a problem that's going to grow unless you deal with it. That's why it's such a wonderful thing to see people coming under the gospel as you're doing today and when you're online as well. [26 : 28] And I hope that we've made the point already that if you are able to be here, even watching online today, if you're able to be here physically and there's no valid reason why you shouldn't, then this is really the best place to be.

It's good to have the online facilities. We don't actually in any way want to be unthankful for that or suggest that we're not grateful for them or that they're not greatly used. But the thing is to be in person together is really the most important issue for us as a church and worshipping the Lord, to worship Him together.

So I would say if you're watching online today and you can be here in person, then again, please consider that's really where you should be because to be together physically is so important, such an important aspect of being Christ's flock in the world because one of the important elements of that is our witness to Jesus, our witness to God because that world out there is not really going to see you if you're actually online.

It's great that you're online if you cannot physically be in church, but if you can, how's the world out there going to see who are God's people? What does it mean to God's people to gather together to worship Him? It's part of our testimony, part of our witness because people in this town, whatever they're going to make of it will not be able to say there are no people here that value Christ Jesus as Lord if we all turn away and don't come out, which is not, I hope, going to happen anyway.

But the point I'm making is this, being together here, coming as Christ's flock to worship Him together is an important statement in itself to the world out there that's watching and indeed to some elements in the world that would dearly love this place to close.

[28 : 16] So, He goes before them. They follow Him. They come under His teaching, under His instruction, the same word and spirit.

So we keep on following Him. Looking to Him for the grace that enables us to do so. And then He says later in the chapter, and I give to them, they hear my voice, I know them and they follow me and I give to them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

Well, you see, the whole point of calling them and especially of effectual calling, the whole point of that is that they will come to have life. That they will come to Jesus Himself so that as He sees them as His flock, He keeps giving them and the emphasis there is I give them eternal life.

life. And that life is life in its abundance. Look at verse 10 in the same chapter here. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

The fullness of life that God has provided in Jesus, that is what Jesus gives to His people. That's why He died. That's why He calls us through the gospel.

[29 : 41] That's why He effectually calls us by His word and spirit. That's why He persuades and enables us to receive Him so that we can receive eternal life. so that we can live forevermore with the fullness of life that only God is able to give and that He gives us through Christ.

So the ultimate, friends, insecurity lies with the Good Shepherd who calls His own sheep by name, who knows each and every one of them, who gives them eternal life and who assures us by that that they will never perish.

The ultimate security, our ultimate security, lies with the Good Shepherd. Our ultimate loss lies with not having Him.

You can lose everything short of eternal life, but you can never lose eternal life once Jesus has given it to you.

That's not to make us complacent. It's simply to impress upon our own minds the assurance that God is true to His word. So we might lose everything short of eternal life, but we'll never lose that.

[31 : 07] On the other hand, we might have everything else short of eternal life, but then so what?

What shall it profit us to gain the whole world but lose our soul? May God bless these thoughts. On His word and the preaching of His word particularly.

We're going to conclude singing Psalm 23. Psalm 23 from the Scottish Psalter. That's on page 229. I'll sing the whole psalm.

The Lord's my shepherd. I'll not want. He makes me down to lie in pastures green. He leadeth me in the quiet waters by. A psalm that wonderfully presents us with something of what we were looking at this morning.

The shepherd's call and the shepherd's giving of eternal life to his people. Goodness and mercy all my life shall surely follow me and in God's house forevermore my dwelling place shall be.

[32 : 14] Psalm 23, the Lord's my shepherd. The Lord's my shepherd. The Lord's my shepherd I'll not want.

He makes me down to lie in pastures green.

He leadeth me the quiet waters by.

My soul he doth restore again.

on it who walked doth make within the paths of righteousness in for his own name's sake.

[33 : 33] O'er, though I walk in death's dark bill, yet will I fear not ill, for thou art with me and thy road and stop me comfort still.

my table love hast furnished in presence of my foes my head the dust with oil and oil and my cup overflows goodness and mercy all my life shall surely shall surely follow me and in God's house forevermore my dwelling place shall be.

now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore. Amen.