

John 10:22-42: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 21 January 2020

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 10 verses 22 to 42. At that time the feast of dedication 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 among my sheep.

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. 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.

The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of them are you going to stone me? The Jews answered him, It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God. Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, You are gods? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came, and scripture cannot be broken, do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, You are blaspheming? Because I said, I am the Son of God. If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father. Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands. He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained. And many came to him, and they said,

John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true, and many believed in him there. The second half of John chapter 10 is set in the Feast of Dedication. Chapter 7 verse 1 to chapter 10 verse 18 was set during the Feast of Tabernacles, and so this is a shift to about two or three months later. Nevertheless, we see something of a continuation of the conversation and the conflict that was going on between Jesus and his Jewish opponents at the earlier feast.

The Feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah, was a seven-day festival that celebrated the national deliverance under the Maccabees. That had occurred in 164 BC, after the temple that had been defiled by Antiochus IV Epiphanes was restored to proper worship three years to the day after that worship was halted.

[2 : 3 6] That Jesus celebrates this feast suggests that it is appropriate to set up new feasts and celebrations, and that there are times when we can celebrate new deliverances of God in history, in a fitting and appropriate manner. Jesus is walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. He's probably not just looking around, rather he is there as it is a place of public discourse and dispute. It's an appropriate place for him to teach. Once again, Jesus is challenged concerning his authority, mission, and identity.

The question that the Jews ask is literally, how long will you take away our life? In the present context, this plays upon Jesus' own statements in verse 17 and 18. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it up again.

No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. The meaning of this peculiar and rare expression is probably as it's translated in most English Bibles, how long will you keep us in suspense? Nevertheless, the actual wording of it, given the context, is worthy of note. They want a straightforward assertion of Jesus' claim to messianic identity from him. While Jesus has spoken cryptically to them on several occasions, in ways that would suggest that he is making messianic claims for himself, he gives them no such clear claim as he gives to the Samaritan woman in chapter 4 verse 29. They clearly want to use this information against Christ, but Jesus has already given them revelation that if they receive it by faith, would give them true insight into his identity and mission. As he says, the works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me. Back in chapter 5 in verses 17 to 20, after his healing of the infirm man by the sheep pool, Jesus had said to them,

My Father is working until now, and I am working. This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. So Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing, and greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. As Jesus acts in his Father's name and by his Father's authority, he demonstrates that he's the true Son of God, the messianic figure that according to the Davidic covenant would be like a son to God, and God would be like his Father.

Of course, Christ is the Son of God in a fuller, deeper sense than just being a Davidic king. However, if they want to know that he is the Christ, witnessing him acting with the authority of the Father would be a pretty sure way of recognizing it. The wording of verse 26 might surprise us.

[5 : 26] We probably think that the wording should be, You are not among my sheep because you do not believe. However, the wording suggests that it's not the belief that makes one a member of the flock, but rather that the response of belief or unbelief manifests whether you are one of the flock or not.

Those whom the Father has given into the hand of the Son will reveal that fact in their display of faith in response to his voice. As Jesus expresses it in chapter 6 verse 37, all that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

The return to the imagery of the sheep recalls the earlier part of this chapter, which we should bear in mind belongs to a discourse that occurred a few months earlier. Once again, as in chapter 5 and elsewhere, it's the voice of Christ that is singled out here.

The voice of Christ is that which gives life. It's the voice of Christ that the sheep recognize and respond to. Christ protects and guards his flock from all predators and leads them to their inheritance of eternal life. No one is able to snatch them out of his hand. Ramsey Michaels notes that verse 29 literally reads, My Father, that which he has given me is greater than all things, and no one can seize it out of the hand of the Father. This is typically translated or understood as a reference to the Father being greater than all, and hence no one is able to snatch the flock out of his hand. However, we should observe that the wording of this statement, as Michaels notes, puts the emphasis upon the Father, and also that it is far from clear that that which is being referred to as greater than all is the Father. It might well be what he has given into the hand of the Son.

Michaels argues for such an interpretation. The gift that the Father has given, the gift of the flock, to Christ, is that which is greater than all things, as it comes from the Father himself. And the point of verse 29 is to parallel the action of Christ in verse 28, showing that the Father and the Son are engaged in the same activity. This demonstrates that the Father and the Son are one.

[7 : 25] After his statement in chapter 8 verse 58, before Abraham was, I am, the Jews had picked up stones to stone him. Now they once more seek to stone him. Jesus wants them to tell him for which work exactly they are stoning him. He has been doing the works of the Father throughout. They rightly perceive, however, that he is making himself equal with God. Jesus' response to this is a difficult one to understand. It's essentially arguing from the lesser to the greater. But it works in a less than straightforward way, and not every step in the reasoning is spelled out for us. The statement that Jesus refers to is from Psalm 82.

God has taken his place in the divine council. In the midst of the gods he holds judgment. How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the fatherless. Maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy.

Deliver them from the hand of the wicked. They have neither knowledge nor understanding. They walk about in darkness. All the foundations of the earth are shaken. I said, you are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you. Nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.

Arise, O God, judge the earth, for you shall inherit all the nations. This psalm speaks about the divine council. In the divine council the Lord was surrounded by angels and heavenly beings, but also by certain human rulers and by prophetic messengers.

Although they were human beings, as prophetic recipients of the word of God, they were described as gods. We might think, as an example of this, of Moses being described as like a god to Pharaoh and also as like a god to Aaron. As a nation, and particularly its rulers, Israel enjoyed something of this identity. They were set up like gods to the nations around, delivering the judgments of God and speaking in his name. Israel was described as the Lord's firstborn son and consequently could speak as his representative and with some of his authority. If the people to whom the word of God came, as his prophetic messengers, could be referred to as gods, how much more the word of God himself who has come to human beings. This is the one time in the Gospel of John that Jesus speaks about the word of God in this manner. And we must remember in chapter 1 that he has been described as the word that was with God and the word that was God. He is not just a recipient of the word, like these people who are called gods. He is the word itself. The term that he has called is not the most important thing.

[9 : 57] What really matters is the substance. And that substance is revealed in the fact that the Father works his works through Christ. Whatever they believe or don't believe about Jesus' own statements concerning himself, they should believe the works of the Father that are being wrought through him, by them, as Jesus has argued earlier, the Father is bearing testimony to Jesus' identity. And in them, it becomes clear that the Father and the Son are one. The Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son.

Once again, they seek to lay hands on him, this time to arrest him. Once again, he escapes from their hands. We know this is because his hour had not yet come. This explanation for their failure is given in chapter 7 verse 30. At this point, Jesus crosses the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at the beginning. We know from chapter 1 verse 28 that this site was Bethany. This reminder of the opening scenes of the gospel serves to bookend the intervening material. It also provides a natural point where we see an end of a phase of Jesus' ministry, and we might be encouraged to consider its import. One of the ways that the opening of the gospel of John is referred to here is in many people's confirmation of the testimony of John concerning Christ.

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