

LIFE ABUNDANT

John 10:10

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“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).

Why did Jesus Christ come into this world? There could hardly be a more important question. Jesus spoke of this frequently, including some of his most memorable sayings.

For instance, when Peter and the other disciples wanted Jesus to impress people his miraculous power Jesus refused, since he had not come for that reason. “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also,” he said, “for that is why I came” (Mk. 1:38). Jesus came to reveal God and preach his gospel to the world. However, those who would limit Jesus’ mission merely to teaching fail to realize that this was just the beginning.

As Jesus drew near to the end of his time on earth, he spoke further about the reason for his coming. In Luke 19:10, he said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” In Matthew 20:28, Jesus emphasized his death on the cross: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

But probably the greatest statement of the reason for Jesus’ coming into the world is found in John 10:10, as the conclusion of his claim to be the door to salvation. Jesus had said, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture” (Jn. 10:9). He meant that those who trust in him would be saved, would be safe, and would be satisfied. Then, to make clear his great purpose, Jesus added, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). It was to give eternal life that Jesus came and taught, and gave his life on the cross.

THE ONE WHO GIVES LIFE

We should remember that Jesus spoke these words in the midst of his dispute with the Pharisees. In John 9, Jesus had healed the man born blind, but the Pharisees immediately afflicted this man and even cast him out from the synagogue. So everything that Jesus says about himself in John 10 is intended to contrast with the attitude of the false religious leaders. This accounts for the first half of John 10:10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.”

This is Jesus’ assessment not only of the Pharisees, but of all false religious leaders. Those who preach a way of salvation based on good works or ritual performance or the paying of money – or any way other than faith alone in Christ – are as wolves among the sheep. The Pharisees were widely admired in their day, but their attitude towards Jesus and his followers showed the evil in their hearts. Today false religious leaders include those who preach tolerance for sin but who will not tolerate the Bible’s teaching. They also include those who minister for personal gain and twist the gospel to attract followers. Jesus, by his atoning death on the cross, is the one and only door to true life, and faith alone is the one way of entering through him. All others who try enter themselves and would lead others over the wall are thieves and robbers. Jesus says “they come only to steal and kill and destroy.”

This is even more true when we consider unbelieving, worldly leaders, who entice the masses with their myths of utopia. D. A. Carson comments:

The world still seeks its humanistic, political saviours – its Hitlers, its Stalins, its Maos, its Pol Pots – and only too late does it learn that they blatantly confiscate personal property (they come ‘only to steal’), ruthlessly trample human life under their foot (they come only... to kill’), and contemptuously savage all that is valuable (they come ‘only... to destroy’).¹

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 385.

Moreover, this is true not only with blatant despots but also with the more pleasurable tyrants of materialism and sensualism. Just as the idols of the Old Testament always enslaved their followers, the more sophisticated idols of consumer society never give life but only take it. This is why God's Son came: to grant life. It was the tree of life that Adam and Eve lost when they fell into sin, and only the Savior from heaven can deliver us from sin and restore us to true and eternal life.

When it comes to eternal life, we have a tendency to think mainly in terms of its quantity. It is life everlasting. But in John 10:10, Jesus emphasizes the quality of the life he gives: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Jesus came to give abundant life. In this chapter he paints a living portrait of the plentiful life he gives, using the illustration of a flock of sheep under the care of a good shepherd. He says that his flock will come in for safety and go out for rich provision in pastures prepared by God, all under the watchful eye of their loving shepherd.

When we think of this imagery, those familiar with the Bible may think of the Twenty-third Psalm, which depicts weak and foolish sheep who find life and blessing simply because they can say, as the psalm begins, "The LORD is my shepherd" (Ps. 23:1).

I SHALL NOT WANT

Psalm 23 poetically describes the life provided to those who trust the Lord as their shepherd. Philip Keller wrote a valuable book on this theme, based on his own experience as a shepherd. He points out the importance of the shepherd's care to the sheep's well-being:

The welfare of any flock is entirely dependent upon the management afforded them by their owner... For Him there is no greater reward, no deeper satisfaction, than that of seeing His sheep well contented, well fed, safe and flourishing under His care... He will go to no end of trouble and labor to supply them with the finest grazing, the richest pasturage, ample winter feed, and clean water... From early dawn until late at night this utterly self-less Shepherd is alert to the welfare of His flock.²

² Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Chicago: Moody, 1970), 21-24.

Based on this analogy, when Jesus says that he came to give abundant life, this doubtlessly involves his *providing care*. Meeting the needs of his sheep absorbs a shepherd's time and energy. And because of this care, those who belong to Jesus can say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Ps. 23:1).

But this raises a question. When Jesus says that he came to give abundant life, and when Psalm 23 says, "I shall not want," what sort of provision does this promise? This is an important question because of the spread of the so-called "prosperity gospel," which teaches that God promises material wealth to all who trust in him.

So widespread is this teaching today that TIME magazine recently ran a cover story titled, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" The article begins with the testimony of George Adams. Adams lost his job at an Ohio factory and moved his family to Houston, Texas so he could join the church of the popular prosperity teacher, Joel Osteen. Osteen's inspirational best-seller, *Your Best Life Now*, is widely credited for spreading the "prosperity gospel" from Pentecostal churches into the evangelical mainstream.³ He preaches a Christian faith that provides blessings not just in heaven, but also consists of happiness, success, and fulfillment here on earth. Embracing Osteen's positive message, George Adams approached life with a new confidence. Applying for a job as a car salesman, he immediately began making sales. He exults, "It's a new day God has given me! I'm on my way to a six-figure income!" When asked what he hopes to receive through his faith, he says, "Twenty-five acres, and three bedrooms. We're going to have a schoolhouse... We want horses and ponies for the boys, so a horse barn. And a pond. And maybe some cattle." "I'm dreaming big," Adams declares, "because all of heaven is dreaming big."⁴

Osteen expresses his version of the prosperity gospel: "I think God wants us to be prosperous. I think he wants us to be happy. I think he wants us to enjoy our lives."⁵ And he unabashedly defines these in material terms. A more extreme example comes from the popular and aptly named Creflo Dollar, whose list of "Believer's Rights" consists

³ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Warner, 2004).

⁴ "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" TIME, Sept. 18, 2006, 49-50.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

of financial wealth, glowing good health, power to heal the sick, bearing children, positive answers to all prayers, and constant protection. Moreover, Dollar claims the believer's right to be a capitalist: "Owning corporations is a part of your destiny as a believer," he writes. Lastly, true believers have power to raise the dead: "If Jesus raised the dead, so can you," he insists.⁶

What are we to make of this "prosperity" gospel? First, we might note some of its positive influences. Prosperity teachers often point out that many people feel downtrodden and hopeless and are inhibited by poor self-esteem. They frequently point out that Christians should not approach life pessimistically or doubtful of God's favor. In this, they are right. When they emphasize that changes in our life demand changes in our thinking, they are also right. Furthermore, people who think optimistically do tend to be more successful. Given the widespread depression in our society today, it is not surprising that people are flocking to hear an upbeat message promising prosperity.

One great concern about the "prosperity gospel" is its reluctance to speak about sin and our need to find grace at the cross. Sin is a depressing topic, they explain, and telling people to confess their sins and seek forgiveness injures their self-esteem. Prosperity is promised by the sheer power of believing, as if our faith exercises divine power on its own. Moreover, one does not receive God's favor merely by believing or declaring it to be so, as prosperity teachers emphasize; only sinners who come to God by the blood of Christ will be saved, and only they may rely on God's blessing in this life and the life to come. To teach otherwise is to deceive the unredeemed with a false hope of God's favor.

What about the central claim of the "prosperity gospel" that God wants all his children to enjoy earthly wealth, perfect health, and worldly success? Is this biblical? The answer is No.

"Prosperity gospel" preachers typically teach that trials such as an illness, the loss of a job, or relationship problems are the result of a lack of faith. But the Bible says that trials are part of God's fatherly plan for growing believers into maturity. The apostle James taught, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,

⁶ These "Believers' Rights" are found at <http://interactive.creflodollarministries.org>, accessed Nov. 23, 2006.

for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (Ja. 1:2-3). Moreover, it is disturbing to read of “prosperity” believers defining salvation almost exclusively in terms of houses, ponds, stables, and other possessions. Jesus taught, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Mt. 6:19-20). He concluded with a stinging rebuke to all who focus on earthly prosperity: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6:21). This means that those whose treasures are on earth do not have their heart set on God, and it raises questions about the eternal situation of those whose gospel is of earthly riches. Jesus called his followers to self-denial in this life, not self-absorption: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk. 9:23).

John 10:10 is frequently cited by “prosperity” preachers because Jesus says he came to give abundant life. But Jesus did not say that he came to give an abundance of things. He came to give life, and that abundantly. And Jesus taught, “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Lk. 12:15). The fact is that money and possessions do not convey happiness, much less life. Kent Hughes writes, “Money can buy things – it can even buy a pasture, but it cannot buy satisfaction.”⁷ Jesus promises a satisfied soul, especially as his sheep feed in the plentiful pastures of his life-giving Word.

Spiritually mature Christians will often enjoy worldly success, though not always. Those who are blessed with material riches should not feel guilty about it, so long as their true treasure is in heaven. The stewardship of wealth is a high calling and those with excess wealth to give are often a great help to the cause of the gospel. Nonetheless, Jesus often warned that money is a spiritual snare; he said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk. 6:20).

It has sometimes been noted that God is a father, not a grandfather: he does not spoil his children but trains them in righteousness. He promises to meet all the genuine needs of his people, but not to gratify our earthly cravings. Paul exulted, “My God will supply every

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 268.

need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). Our main needs are spiritual. Every believer may rely upon God’s provision of “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

In fact, God especially delights to cause us to prosper spiritually in the midst of earthly difficulties. This is one of the points of the Book of Job. Satan argued that Job only trusted God because of his earthly prosperity, but when Job continued to praise God in the midst of suffering, God was greatly glorified. The believer’s true wealth is that his or her joy does not depend on earthly prosperity. Jesus supplies us with abundant spiritual life in any circumstance, so that Christians can contentedly praise him: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1). Those who pursue worldly happiness will ever be restless, always needing more. But those who find their contentment in Christ can say with the psalmist: “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters” (Ps. 23:2).

GUIDANCE FOR THE JOURNEY

Having spoken of provision, Psalm 23 goes on to promise the good shepherd’s *guidance*: “He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake” (Ps. 23:3).

The comparison between Christians and sheep is not a compliment. James Boice writes: “Sheep are stupid creatures. In fact, they are probably the most stupid animals on earth. One aspect of their stupidity is seen in the fact that they so easily wander away.”⁸ Sheep like to eat foods that poison them, and they like to do things that will cost them their life. Therefore, sheep require a shepherd to survive.

The same is true of us spiritually. When Jesus says he came to give life to his sheep, this involves his on-going guidance. This is why we have the Bible; the abundant life that Jesus gives is one that is lived under the guidance of his Word. He also provides leaders in the church as well as fellowship among believers. When needed, he is willing to extend his staff to pull us back into line. By all these means, Jesus promises life-giving guidance to all who follow him.

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:750.

SPIRITUAL COMFORT

Psalm 23 continues with *spiritual comfort*, which the good shepherd gives to his flock. Jesus promises abundant life, but still we live in a world shadowed by death. Psalm 23:4 therefore says, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

The shadow of death deprives many people of the joy of life. But not so the Christian who knows the Lord’s promise. We must face death, but we need not fear it. Why? Because the Lord promises to be with us and his sin-atonement cross has removed everything a Christian has to fear in death.

Some time ago I had the privilege of ministering to a Christian brother who was facing the rapid approach of death. At our last meeting, we both knew that he would pass through death within a day or two. Psalm 23 comforted him with its message that the valley of the shadow of death is not the end; indeed, it is in the middle of the psalm. It tells the believer that death is now but a shadow; the substance of death having been conquered on the cross. But still, my friend worried about the actual experience of dying. He asked me, “Pastor, what is it going to be like to die?” I had to confess that I had little to say, except that the Lord has promised to be with him for comfort and to remove any harm from the experience: “For you are with me,” David exulted; “your rod and staff they comfort me.”

Even more, Christians have every reason to look forward to the life that awaits us beyond the grave. Here is where full and unfettered prosperity truly awaits us, where moth cannot destroy, thief cannot steal, and where time will cause no rust.

Psalm 23:5 makes three comforting promises about the life to come. First, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” This speaks of our acceptance into God’s glorious presence. Despite the accusations of sin and the devil, a place has been prepared for each believer in Christ. Whatever famine lies before us here, a table of feasting awaits us above. Jesus promised: “In my Father’s house are many rooms.... I am going there to prepare a place for you” (Jn. 14:2).

Secondly, the psalmist wrote, “You anoint my head with oil.” Ancient hosts provided wine and oil to the weary traveler; oil to soothe the skin and wine to cleanse the dusty throat. For this reason, a shining face was known as the face of a friend. In Psalm 104:15 David thanks God for “wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine.” Here we have a vision of Christ welcoming us into heaven with oil to soothe the hurts of our passage through life and death.

Thirdly, Psalm 23:5 comforts us with promised abundance in the life to come: “My cup overflows.” Whatever we hope for in heaven, holding out our longings as a cup to the Lord, what we actually experience will cause that cup to overflow. What a comfort it is, living in a sinful, difficult world like ours, to know that overflowing glories await us in heaven.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

Jesus came to give us not money, not possessions, not earthly positions of power and prestige. He came to give us life. And that life is found through fellowship with him. “In him was life,” John wrote, “and that life was the light of men” (Jn. 1:4). David concluded Psalm 23 with a similar statement of divine fellowship and life, both now and in eternity: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Ps. 23:6).

But what is the key to this abundant life? Does prosperity depend on us cultivating high self-esteem and a bright outlook, or developing effective life-skills? According to Psalm 23, the abundant life depends not on the supposed strength, wisdom, or skill of the sheep themselves. In fact, the characteristic of all sheep is that they have little of these. What matters is having the right shepherd – a good shepherd who will provide, guide, comfort, and receive us into the green pastures of the life to come. Jesus came as a life-giving Savior. He says, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture” (Jn. 10:9).

Can you say of Jesus, “The LORD is my shepherd?” If not, then what could possibly keep you from coming to him for this loving care and

provision. Is it your love of sin? Surely, as the Spirit helps you, you can see that the beaten-down path of sin never leads to such green and quiet places. Jesus died to free you from the bondage of sin's false advertising; his cross is the gate to the sheep pen so that there you might confess your sins, have the burden of your guilt drop from your back, and be received into the fold of his purchased, privileged flock.

If you have done that, if you can say, "Yes, I am part of that flock, for the Lord is indeed my Shepherd," then surely you ought to refresh your faith in him, renew your vow of love for him, and follow with new strength in the path where he is leading. "The LORD is my shepherd," we say by faith. And Jesus replies with words of manifold blessing: "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10).