



SAFE IN THE HANDS OF GOD

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

Catalog No. 870

John 10:22-42

22nd Message

May 9, 1993

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Last week, as I reflected on Mother's Day, which we celebrate today, I thought about my wife Kathy and her role in my life as the mother of our three sons. I have already shared some details of my own painful journey in life. I grew up in an alcoholic home, and that has taken a toll on my own family. While I have not been a particularly safe person for my boys to run to in times of need, my wife Kathy has. In fact, when I think of images of safety and security, one that immediately comes to my mind is Kathy's lap. Through the years she has typically been the first to rise in the morning, and as our boys would wake up, one by one they would sit in her lap, spending a few moments snuggling and being stroked by her. Mom's lap has been a secure place in our home. It is the place where tears are loved away; where our boys run to find healing from a painful fall, a critical word, the rejection of a friend, even the intimidation of an overbearing father. It is the place where made-up songs are sung, where hundreds of books have been read.

One book that has been read many times on that lap is called *Love You Forever*, by Robert Munsch. I would like to read it for you on this Mother's Day:

A mother held her new baby and very slowly rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she held him, she sang:

I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

The baby grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was two years old, and he ran all around the house. He pulled all the books off the shelves. He pulled all the food out of the refrigerator and he took his mother's watch and flushed it down the toilet. Sometimes his mother would say, "This kid is driving me CRAZY!" But at night time, when that two-year-old was quiet, she opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor, looked up over the side of his bed; and if he was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. While she rocked him she sang:

I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

The little boy grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was nine years old. And he never wanted to come in for dinner, he never wanted to take a bath, and when grandma visited he always said bad words. Sometimes his mother wanted to sell him to the zoo! But at night time, when he was asleep, the mother quietly opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep, she picked up that nine-year-old boy and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked him she sang:

I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

The boy grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was a teenager. He had strange friends and he wore strange clothes and he listened to strange music. Sometimes the mother felt like she was in a zoo! But at night time, when that teenager was asleep, the mother opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep she picked up that great big boy and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. While she rocked him she sang:

I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

That teenager grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was a grown-up man. He left home and got a house across town. But sometimes on dark nights the mother got into her car and drove across town. If all the lights in the son's house were out, she opened his bedroom window, crawled across the floor, and looked up over the side of his bed. If that great big man was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked him she sang:

I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

Well, that mother, she got older. She got older and older and older. One day she called up her son and said, "You'd better come see me because I'm very old and sick." So her son came to see her. When she came in the door she tried to sing the song. She sang"

I'll love you forever
I'll like you for always. . .

But she couldn't finish because she was too old and sick. The son went to his mother. He picked her up and rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And he sang this song:

I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my Mommy you'll be.

When the son came home that night, he stood for a long time at the top of the stairs. Then he went into the room where his very new baby daughter was sleeping. He picked her up in his arms and very slowly rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked her he sang:

I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

A mother's lap is a secure haven. For many, it is the most secure place on earth. But there is a place that is more secure. It is the Heavenly Father's hands, as our text today from John 10 will show. We pick up the story in verse 22:

At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem; it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon.

Winter is the rainy season in Israel. The portico of Solomon, which John identifies as the site for the exchange that

follows, was a large, roofed-in enclosure, supported by stately columns on one side of the temple area. According to the book of Acts, this was where, following the resurrection, the first believers gathered regularly to proclaim that Jesus was the Christ. Here, sheltered from the rain and cold, Jesus resumed his teaching ministry during the Feast of Dedication or, as we know it today, the Feast of Hanukkah.

As far as the Pharisees were concerned, this particular winter was very much the winter of their discontent. Blinded by their narrow legalism, they still did not recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of the Scriptures. The frosty conditions outside the temple mirrored the frozen spirit of these cold-hearted individuals. Some of you mothers may have felt your heart ache as I read that book a moment ago. It is because your children are not responding in the way you would wish. Imagine the pain Jesus felt. He had "come to his own, but his own received him not." Mothers suffering the pain of rejection can particularly identify with the Savior's pain.

Consequently, these men were not only untrustworthy shepherds of God's people, but, as our Lord stated in this chapter, they were demonstrating that they should no longer be included among the sheep that paid attention to his voice. He who had so carefully shepherded Israel in the past was now calling to the "sheep of his pasture" through Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Disregard of that call was evidence that they were not part of his flock.

Three months had gone by since Jesus had taught during the feast of Tabernacles in early October. (The Feast of Dedication is at Christmas time.) The OT has no reference to this festival. It had its origin later, in an astonishing episode in the history of Israel. Antioches Epiphanes, one of the successors of Alexander the Great, sought to unify his empire by establishing a single religion throughout the land. He ordered the Jews to give up their religion and its laws and adopt the worship of Zeus. Setting a pagan altar on the great altar in the temple at Jerusalem, he placed there an image of Zeus. This, of course, resulted in great turmoil and suffering. In a series of violent battles with the forces of Antioches, Judas the Maccabee ("the Hammerer") led the Jews to victory. And on the 25th of Kislev (December) 164 B.C., three years later to the day, the desecrated temple was cleansed and sacrifice offered in accordance with the Law. For eight days, the people joyously celebrated the rededication of the temple and its altar, and it was decreed that a similar festival be held each year, beginning on the 25th of Kislev. To this day the festival remains one of the most important Jewish feasts. It is, of course, all to the good that it can be held in the homes of the people. The festival is characterized by the use of lights (Josephus called it "the Festival of Lights"), because such a freedom had shone upon the Jews. Families used a lamp-stand with eight lights; one candle was lighted on the first day of the festival, then another on each succeeding day, until all eight were lit.

Continuing now, John says:

The Jews therefore gathered around Him, and were saying 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, these bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep.

In a remarkable scene, the Jews encircled Jesus and asked him, "Are you the Messiah or aren't you?" "I told you," he

replied. They were not seeking confirmation in order to worship him. They were merely attempting to get an unambiguous statement to use for the attack upon him that they were planning.

Jesus, however, was unlikely to oblige them. Not once in a public discourse with the Jews had he explicitly declared himself to be the Messiah. He told the woman at the well of Samaria, and the man who had been born blind, that he was the Son of God, but to these Jews he had never said, "I am the Messiah." Why was that? It was because the term had too many political and military connotations — and Jesus was always careful to avoid those overtones.

The Jews' idea of what the Messiah would do differed greatly from Jesus' fulfillment of the biblical predictions. They visualized the Messiah as a conquering hero who, like the family of Judas Maccabeus, would drive out the Romans, liberate the temple, and enable the Jewish nation to gain control of the land. But Jesus never intended to do that; therefore to make the claim that he was indeed the Messiah would be to arouse in them false hopes.

"I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep," said Jesus. All of his life and ministry testified to his identity: the restoration of a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years; the thoroughly attested healing of a man born blind; and shortly thereafter, the resurrection of an indisputably dead man. These miracles, together with his teaching, were a fulfillment of Isaiah's predictions that when the Messiah came "the eyes of the blind would be opened, the ears of the deaf would be unstopped, the lame would leap for joy, and the tongue of the dumb would sing." Furthermore, a group of people around him followed him as the Messiah. They were in no doubt about his identity. These Jews had access to the same teaching. It wasn't due to lack of information that they failed to see Jesus as the Messiah. He made it quite clear that it was lack of faith, not lack of evidence, that led to their uncertainty.

It is difficult at times to understand Scripture because we have a distorted view of what it is saying. I am reminded of an incident that happened a couple of years ago when our high school group was holding a social event. A couple of times a year our high schoolers meet at a shopping mall, or some public place, with the object of finding the high school staffers who have disguised themselves. This particular time the group met at the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. Our high school pastor, Joel Werk, borrowed his disguise, the uniform of a PG&E lineman, from a friend and dressed up as a worker. Casually he went into the arcade, and began acting as though he was fixing the electronic games. Sensing there was something wrong with this scenario, a security guard came by and said to Joel, "Who are you and what are you doing?" "I'm a pastor," was the unlikely response. "I am playing a game with my students." "Sure," said the security man, and he arrested Joel!

How difficult it is to convince people when you don't look like what they expect! That is the problem Jesus had with the Jews. They expected a military leader who would free them from the yoke of Rome, but Messiah came as the Suffering Servant to give himself on behalf of the sins of man and defeat a much stronger foe than Rome. He would break the strangle-hold of evil which Satan had upon the human race. That is why he had not told them directly that

he was the Messiah. The Pharisees had rejected the evidence. As they read the Scriptures, they selected the evidence they wanted to believe and disregarded the rest.

The same is true today. I have a friend who is taking a religion class at a local college, and his professor is continually trying to prove to the class that Jesus was just a man and that he never claimed to be anything more. A couple of weeks ago, the professor read to the class from the "Gospel of Philip," an early third century apocryphal work. Afterwards my friend asked the professor about the Gospel of John and some of its claims. My friend said the teacher became very nervous and didn't want to continue the discussion.

The action of the Pharisees on this occasion is exactly what happens today when people read about Jesus and fail to believe in him. Jews and Gentiles alike indulge in this, believing only what they want to believe. Why are people so obtuse? What explains their blindness and dullness of hearing? Jesus says it is because "they don't belong to my sheep." The fact that they are not his sheep does not excuse them, however. It indicts them. They have never come to him, they have never gotten close enough to find out who he really is.

This provides the setting for what follows, which is one of the greatest passages in all the Scriptures. Verse 27:

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall 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."

What a marvelous word of assurance! It answers two critically important and frequently asked questions: "How can you tell a true Christian from someone who merely calls himself a Christian?" And, "Can a Christian lose his salvation?"

In response to the first question, Jesus says two things. First, "My sheep hear My voice." They are drawn to what he has to say. They believe it is the truth, and they want to hear more.

One of the most exciting things I have found in my years of ministry here at PBC is observing the hunger of people for the words of Jesus, the one who is "full of grace and truth." His words have drawn you and fed you, and they always will. What brought you here this morning on such a beautiful Mother's Day when you could be at the beach or relaxing in the mountains? It's Jesus, isn't it? It's his insights into life; his solutions to the problems we all wrestle with; his offer of deliverance from the inner bondage we feel as we seek to live life and find ourselves continually enmeshed in wrong things, in hurt and anguish and pain. It is the word of God that brings you here week after week.

This is the first characteristic of a true believer: he longs to hear the word of God. He wants to know more. He reads and studies and learns. His ears are open to the word of God.

Secondly, says Jesus, "they follow me." True believers obey him. They do what he commands. It doesn't always happen immediately or without a struggle. All of us wrestle at times with what the Lord says. We even resist. Sheep are stubborn; they wander. The hymnist put it this way:

*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love.*

And sometimes he lets us search restlessly, relentlessly, until, like the prodigal son, we weary ourselves. Then, when we have exhausted our options, we turn to him. No sheep has ever wandered too far away to find his way back. Though we take a hundred steps away from God it takes but one step to return to fellowship with him.

And ultimately, all true sheep follow him. We don't follow the world; we follow the Lord. The point is that once we see clearly what Jesus wants for us there is an internal agreement that it is the right way, and we have a humble heart that wants to obey. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." This is the mark of a true sheep.

So these are the marks of Christ's sheep. Like sheep, we too are branded. Our brand-marks are in two places: on our ears (*we hear Christ*), and on our feet (*we follow him*).

Why do sheep act that way? What makes the difference? Jesus reveals three things he has done which make his sheep act as they do. These are not things he will do if sheep keep their part (they are not conditional); rather, they explain what lies behind the actions of his sheep.

First, "I give eternal life to them," says Jesus. What is the primary element that holds us to Jesus? What keeps us going day by day and brings us together weekly? It is the life he gives! As we have seen in previous weeks, the focus of this phrase is not on the quantity but the quality of this life. It is the life that is appropriate for the age to come, the kind of life that people will enjoy in the final shape of things. Though the banquet is later, we have the first fruits of this life of peace right now: a sense of inner serenity and joy and love — a sense of belonging. It is a quality of life that comes so continually to us that we would give up anything else rather than give it up.

Notice also that this quality of life has an element of assurance about it: it will never end. And it has a certainty of safety, of security about it: we will never perish. Isn't that a marvelous word? We live in a world that is perishing, a world that is headed for judgment and destruction. People all around us are committed to ways of living that will end at last in hell. But what a wonderful word of assurance is here for the Christian! It is a life that survives death, that even disdains death. Everyone here this morning is headed for death, yet many among us are unafraid. We do not look hopelessly toward the future. We know that a way has been provided by which we will not even know death or sense it when it happens, because we will be ushered immediately into glory and life and truth.

Thirdly, this is a life that is guarded, kept and protected by two unconquerable Beings. Jesus said, "No one shall 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." Putting these two concepts together, Paul wrote in Colossians, "Your life is hid with Christ in God." No one, not even we ourselves, can take us out of the Father's hand. The ultimate security of the sheep rests with the Good Shepherd. Who can steal from God? Who has the strength or subtlety necessary to overpower or outwit the sovereign Father? No one.

Salvation is from God! C.S. Lewis discovered this to be true. He described his own conversion in these words,

In the Trinity term of 1939, I gave in and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed, perhaps that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not see what is now the most shining and obvious thing: the divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The prodigal son at least walked home on his own feet, but who can duly adore the love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking and struggling, resentful, darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?

He tried to run away, but God found him.

Like everything Jesus does, this preserving action is not accomplished independent of the Father. We have seen throughout this book that all that Jesus says and does is merely the embodiment of the Father's will. And so Jesus tells the Pharisees, "I and the Father are one." The word for "one" is in the neuter, not the masculine case. It is not saying, therefore, that Jesus and the Father are one in person (then their distinctiveness would be obliterated); rather, they are perfectly one in action, in what they do. What Jesus does, the Father does.

Hearing this, the enraged Jews tried to kill him. Verse 31:

The Jews took up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?" The Jews answered Him, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out {to be} God."

Some say Jesus never claimed to be God, but the Jews clearly understood his words to be that very claim. Their immediate reaction was to pick up stones in order to put him to death. Notice how quietly and without perturbation Jesus responds to this mob justice: "For which one of my good works are you stoning me for?" he asks. In John 8, Jesus had asked them, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" No one responded. The thought is the same here. Were they going to stone a man whose life they could not fault? Their response was that they were not stoning him for his works, but for his words. His claim to be God, they said, was blasphemy. It is ironic that they said, "You, being a man, make Yourself out {to be} God." The truth was just the opposite: that he being God, made himself to be man.

Jesus responds by quoting the 82nd Psalm:

Jesus answered them, "Has it not been written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father. "

Psalm 82 deals with the problem of the unjust judges — the Supreme Court of Israel, if you like. The psalm opens

with these words:

**God presides in the great assembly;
He gives judgment among the gods.**

The judges of Israel were acting as agents of God. God was in their midst, and the judgment they pronounced was the judgment of God. The psalm was an exhortation to these men to uphold the rights of the poor and to defend the weak. It clearly called these men gods. Verses 6-7:

**I said, "You are gods;
You are all sons of the Most High."
But you will die like mere men;
You will fall like every other ruler.**

Jesus' argument is, "If the term 'gods' can be used of men, plain vanilla men who serve as judges and do God's work in that way, how much more can it be rightly applied to the one whom the Father himself sanctified and sent into the world?" It is significant that Jesus uses the word "sanctified" at this particular time. The word means, "to set apart for God's exclusive use." This was the occasion when the Jews were commemorating the sanctification of the temple, but they remained unaware that the building itself was merely a shadow and that the true temple was standing before them. The critical sanctification was the setting aside of the preincarnate Son to do the work for which he was set apart: to die for the sins of the world.

What a startling claim Jesus made! He was either out of his mind, a rambling lunatic, or he was telling the truth. Don't describe him as merely a good man or a great teacher. If he was telling the truth, he is the most important Being in the universe. He is at the center of everything. He is the giver of truth. To ignore him is to grope in darkness, to live in rebellion.

But not everyone rejected him. John closes the account with these words:

Therefore they were seeking again to seize Him, and He eluded their grasp. And He went away again beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing, and He was staying there. And many came to Him and were saying, "While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true." And many believed in Him there.

These people, the "many who believed in Him there," saw the confirmation of the word of John in the works of Jesus.

Through the centuries ever since, Jesus' words and works have continued to release people. He is not one who, being a man, made himself out to be God. It was quite the opposite: He being God, made himself to be man. We are called to listen to him, to follow him, and to worship him. He is the Good Shepherd. He tenderly holds us close to himself and sings to us,

*I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always;
As long as you're living
My lamb you will be.*

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