

## 2. ARE CHRIST'S SHEEP GUARANTEED ETERNAL SAFETY?

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**“I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand” (John 10: 28).**

### ONLY ONE DOOR FOR THE SHEEP.

In the Bible there is a significance attached to some important doors. For instance, there was only one door into Noah's Ark. When the rains came God Himself shut that door. All inside were safe and finally saved. All locked outside perished.

When Jesus twice says, **“I am the door of the sheep ...” (10: 7, 9)**, he was making an exclusive claim. This is an unpopular message in our society. Tolerance is the new catch cry. Whatever is true for me is my truth. If it's true for me, then it is true. But watch out. If you don't accept my truth, then I am intolerant of your truth. Today's brand of tolerance means society is adrift upon the wavy seas of subjectivity.

Over and against this, our Bible says, **There is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12)**. Our Lord says, **“I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6)**.

Jesus the Son of the Most High God says, **“I am the door ... and no one comes to God the Father but by me.”** An exclusive claim. No other world religious leader is “the door” that leads to the life of the Age to Come. Ultimately, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. <sup>1</sup>

However, an important question arises. Having once heard the voice of the Good Shepherd, having once accepted the Gospel message of Christ Jesus and believed in his Name, having entered by the door into God's promised salvation, are we (like those in Noah's ark) safely locked inside the ark of salvation and thus automatically *guaranteed* eternal security with no possibility of ever being 'lost'? What exactly does Jesus mean by saying that **no one shall snatch them out of my hand?**

### A BRIEF EXCURSUS: ONE FLOCK, ONE SHEPHERD

In passing we note Jesus' word, **“And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock, (with) one shepherd” (v. 16)**. <sup>2</sup>

The Roman Catholic Vulgate Bible unfortunately translated this, one fold, one shepherd. I say, unfortunately, because their 'take' has been used to justify that the one fold is the Mother Church of Rome, as though the Lord is speaking about one organisational control. Jesus does not say there will be one fold. No. He says there will be **one flock**. Christ's sheep are found in various churches and denominations. Definitely not under the umbrella of the Roman Catholic Papacy!

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<sup>1</sup> This means, (and in some places in the world I would lose my head for saying this, and even by writing it I may be making myself a marked man) but this has to be said, even Mohammed will finally bow his knee and confess that Jesus is Lord Messiah to God's glory.

<sup>2</sup> There is a play on Greek wording here that is impossible for English speakers to appreciate ... *mia poimnee, heis poimeen*.

So, Jesus says there is **one flock** with **one shepherd**. He's not talking about organisational oneness, but organic unity; Each sheep is united by direct and intimate faith in the Good Shepherd! And of course, the **other sheep** he says he **already has**, refers to the Gentiles soon to join his flock. <sup>3</sup>

## THE NEW COVENANT OF PEACE

Did you notice in our first article that God promised to make a covenant of peace by sending a servant of David, a good shepherd to tend His flock?

Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. And I will make a covenant of peace with them ... (Ez. 34: 25).

The enmity, the hostility, the wall of separation between Jew & Gentile would be broken down at Calvary. It took the death of Christ on the cross to usher in **the covenant of peace** ...

The NT states that Gentiles were **at one time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in his flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in himself he might make the two into one new humanity, <sup>(4)</sup> thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity (Eph. 2: 12-16).**

## THE SHEEP GATE HAS NO BOLTS AND BARS!

And another slight digression. And it's most encouraging. If you go to **Nehemiah chapter 3** you will read about the ten gates going into the city of Jerusalem. You read for instance, about the Fish Gate. It's doors had **bolts and bars (v. 3)**. You read about the Old Gate. It's doors had **bolts and bars (v. 6)**. You read about the Valley Gate. It's doors had **bolts and bars (v. 14)**. You read about the Fountain Gate, and the other gates. They all had ---you guessed it --- **bolts and bars!**

But, when we come to the Sheep Gate there is *no mention* of **bolts and bars**. When Jesus promises that he will **go before (v.4)** his sheep, and that his sheep **shall go in and out, and find pasture (v. 9)** we must understand that in the OT to **go in and out**, was code for living a free and safe existence under God. <sup>5</sup> No bolts and bars are the order of the day in God's flock under His good shepherd!

This leads directly to the question:-

## ARE THE SHEEP AUTOMATICALLY GUARANTEED ETERNAL SECURITY?

**"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**

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<sup>3</sup> Note how in typical Hebrew thinking, Jesus speaks of something yet to actually occur as though it's already a reality. The sheep are his by the Father's design and gift. When he spoke, they were Christ's notionally according to the Father's promise, but not yet really. The promise is as good as done!

<sup>4</sup> The NRSV reads, **... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.**

<sup>5</sup> The leader of Israel is one who can bring the people in and out to live peaceable and secure lives without fear of lawlessness and foreign invasion because the land is at peace (e.g. Num. 27:17; Deut. 28: 6; I Kings 3:7; Ps. 121: 8).

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" (vs. 27-30).

Here is a precious promise that has brought huge comfort and assurance to God's people down through the centuries. Jesus promises to give his sheep **eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any one snatch them out of my hand.** Does this mean "Once Saved, Always Saved?"

Unfortunately, when quoting our Saviour here, many overlook the condition which is an integral part of the promise. Note the first part of the sentence: **My sheep hear my voice.** Eternal security and eternal life are only guaranteed to those who "**hear my voice**" and who "**follow me**". If I may adopt a later NT verse which is a perfect commentary on this principle, it is **Hebrews 5: 9,**

**He became the Author (source) of eternal life unto all those who [are] obey[ing] him. <sup>6</sup>**

In **John 10: 27** the verbs "**hear**" and "**follow**" --- **my sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me** --- are present indicatives. And Greek present indicatives usually denote **action in progress.** Jesus' sheep do not just listen to him at one moment in time. Jesus' sheep don't just hear Jesus' call at the moment of 'conversion'. Jesus' sheep are defined as those who *continue* to listen and *continue* to obey. We must conclude therefore, that the promise of eternal life, the promise of entrance into the Kingdom of God, is conditional: **Jesus promises conditional security!**

Christ's giving the promise of eternal life to his sheep is contingent upon their habitual listening and continual following the voice of the Good Shepherd. Only the sheep who continue to obey Jesus are the sheep who are guaranteed eternal security. Security is contingent upon on-going obedience.

**OBJECTION:-** "BUT Greg, this is no comfort nor assurance to me. How can I trust myself? How can I know I will continue faithful to the end? How can I be sure I will stay true if I am ever tortured for my faith in Christ? What you are saying is no guarantee against the weakness and the proneness to failure that is in my own heart. Have we not all felt that keenly?"

I am unable to find in Scripture any guarantee *against myself!* In Paul's list of things that cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ, and that cannot pluck us out of His Almighty Hand, *I myself am missing (Romans 8: 35)!* Paul writes;

**For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** I cannot find a single promise assuring me that I cannot pluck myself out of Christ's hand --- either by negligence or wilfulness.

On the contrary, I find many warnings to make sure I continue to walk in Christ. Thank God, the believer can have full assurance that he or she is on the road that leads to life. We can be sure that if we continue on the road that leads to eternal life, that we shall reach the right destination, because nothing less than God's Sovereign Hand holds us. There is no room for doubt or anxiety in this walk of faith, hope and love. God is faithful. Christ is our good Shepherd.

Glory looms ahead! **We rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5: 3)!** The Kingdom is coming! Obeying the word of Jesus we know we are on the glory road! But, the NT continually uses the word "**if**" ... "**if you continue**", "**if you hold fast your confident hope**", "**if you hold fast the message**", "**if you overcome**" then you shall enter into the joy of your Lord. (e.g. I Cor. 15: 2; Col. 1:23; Heb. 10:23, etc.)

David Pawson wisely says,

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<sup>6</sup> Again, the tense of the Greek verb for "obey" is a present active participle, which accurately translated is "obeying".

It is therefore not surprising that assurance and perseverance are linked in Christian experience. When believers give in to temptation, one of the first things to suffer is their assurance. That's when doubts and fears creep in ... This is because we have grieved the Spirit who is the source of our assurance. It is guilt (real or imagined ...) that makes us hypersensitive to any questioning of our security.

The cure for guilt is forgiveness, which is constantly available to those who freely confess their need (I John 1: 9). With the restored relationship, the assurance will return. The sooner we take our sins and fears to the Lord, the better ... If you want to feel secure about the future, keep close to Christ. <sup>7</sup>

Listen. If I read aright, the entire Bible, both Old & New Testaments agrees with this principle: **The just shall live by [his/her] faith[fulness] (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1: 17; Gal. 3: 11; Heb. 10:38)**. God has asked us to cooperate with His power, to trust His promises. He has made us to be moral, rational, responsible creatures. God cannot save a man or a woman against either their own perverse disobedience, or indeed, their own negligence (*cp* Heb. 2:1).

Yes, all of the Sovereign power of our God is keeping us as we continue to exercise faith. As we wait upon Him to keep us, we are being kept. In keeping the teaching of Jesus, we are being kept by the Good Shepherd. This is none other than our Lord said, **"Remain in me; and I in you" (John 15:3)**. **"By your perseverance you will win your souls" (Lk 21:19)**. **"He who perseveres to the end shall be saved"**.

If any man falls at any stage in his spiritual life, it is not from want of divine grace, nor from overwhelming power of adversaries, but from his neglect to use that which he may or may not use. We cannot be protected against ourselves in spite of ourselves. <sup>8</sup>

**OBJECTION:-** "But Greg, what about the verse that says, **"God is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the Presence of His glory with exceeding joy (Jude 25)**? Ah, let's read that carefully, shall we? It does not say, "God is bound to keep you from falling." It says, He is able to keep you from falling. And significantly, just a few verses earlier Jude says, **"But you beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ ... But you beloved, keep yourselves in the love of God" (Jude 17, 20)**.

There are two sides to keeping. God is able to keep provided we stay within His reach! You will stand faultless before His presence because you have kept the teaching of the apostles of Jesus Christ, thereby remaining in His love. We have our part to play. There is no guarantee against ourselves! There is an ought to incumbent upon us, a duty to keep, so that we may be kept.

**OBJECTION:-** "*BUT Greg*", you say, "remember Peter? His faith failed at the critical moment, but Jesus prayed for him that his faith would not ultimately fail, and Jesus' prayers are always answered!"

"How much more so, now that Jesus is glorified in heaven? Will not the intercessions of our Faithful High Priest now keep us? Surely God the Father always answers the prayers of Jesus? Did not Jesus say, **"Father, I know you always hear me" (John 11: 42)**? How can we fail to reach the destination if Jesus himself is praying for us, upholding us before the Father?

Friends, why not put our question to Peter himself for his answer?

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has begotten us again to a living Hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and that will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you**

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<sup>7</sup> David Pawson, *Once Saved, Always Saved?* Hodder & Stroughton, London, 1996, p120-121

<sup>8</sup> B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Vol. 1, London, John Murray, 1903, p 532

who are [being] kept [protected, guarded] **through faith** for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (I Peter 1: 3-7).

## BUT WHAT'S MISSING?

John MacArthur is a strong Calvinist and believes in the doctrine of OSAS (Once Saved, Always Saved). Commenting on I Peter 1: 3-7 he writes (now see if you can *pick up what he leaves out*, what's missing in his commentary --- it's glaring, it's blatant, and I think it's dishonest);

Peter undoubtedly remembered his own experience as he penned that paragraph. He knew better than anyone did how wonderful it is to be kept by God. He knew full well that his security was not the fruit of his own faithfulness --- but he had been kept in the faith by God's grace even when his own fleshly tendency was to be *unfaithful* and abandon Christ. It was God who graciously drew him back, and it was God who kept his faith from failing even in the midst of his trials. Peter could take no credit whatsoever for having avoided ultimate failure.

Notice that Peter did not tell believers they must somehow secure themselves in Christ. He did not suggest that their security was somehow dependent on their own faithfulness. He did not give them a pep talk or try to drum up their courage. He remembered too well the folly of his own self-sufficiency and self-reliance.

Instead, he pointed them to the One who was truly able to keep them from falling, and to present them faultless before His throne (cf. Jude 25). It was the Lord who kept Peter, and it is the Lord who ensures every believer's ultimate security. Our own fleshly tendencies may fill us with doubt and fear and uncertainty --- and well they should. But it is to His faithfulness that we should turn for strength and encouragement, for "[Even when] we are faithless, he remains faithful; he cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2: 13).<sup>9</sup>

So, did you spot the problem? I must say that I have no problem with MacArthur's insistence that Peter was kept in the faith by God's grace even when his own fleshly tendency was to be *unfaithful* and abandon Christ. And, I have no problem with MacArthur's insistence that it was God who graciously drew him back.

But here's my problem. MacArthur leaves out two key words that the apostle Peter puts into the equation. MacArthur leaves out that Peter says we **are kept by the power of God through faith!**

God is able to do everything for us, except believe for us! Yes, faith comes with an empty hand. Faith comes convinced of its own proneness to failure. Faith comes to God precisely because it knows it has no abiding strength. Faith draws upon God's power and resources of grace. But faith is responsible to keep coming in its poverty of spirit! Faith keeps on looking to God to keep.

Furthermore, did you notice MacArthur's other blatant error when quoting the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 2:13 --- "[Even when] we are faithless, he remains faithful; he cannot deny Himself"? MacArthur inconveniently again omits to quote the entire verse! Let's read the whole relevant text, shall we?

**If we endure, we shall also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; if we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2: 12-13)**

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<sup>9</sup> John MacArthur, *The Murder of Jesus*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2004, p140

Yes, God is faithful. He cannot deny Himself. But the text says He *will* deny us, if we deny him. Paul is using **Deuteronomy 31: 6,8** to assure Timothy that the LORD is with His people and that He will go before them, and that He will not forsake them, and that He will not fail them.

However, the solemn warning in **Deuteronomy 31** follows, saying that when the people arise and forsake His word, **“Then I will forsake them and hide My face from them ...(v.16).** The faithlessness of many in Israel did not nullify the faithfulness of God in keeping His promises, neither did the faithfulness of God stop many in Israel from becoming unfaithful. Some branches were cut off! The faithfulness of God cannot avail for those who become unfaithful.

The real root of confusion for Calvinists is their failure to recognize that the certainty of election and perseverance is with respect, not to particular individual men unconditionally, but rather with respect to the *ekklesia*, the corporate body of all who, through living faith, are in union with Christ the true Elect and the Living Covenant between God and all who trust in him. <sup>10</sup>

The peril is never that the Lord will forsake His people, but rather that some of His people will abandon Him. Unfaithfulness definitely severs from Christ, who says, **“Remain in me, and I in you” (John 15: 4).** We have a race to run. We have a battle to fight. And it lasts until the end of this life.

**OBJECTION:- “But Greg,** are you not teaching salvation by works? If arriving at the end means it depends on my faith[fulness] then salvation is not by grace, but by your own works!” Now, I agree that Scripture says we are not saved by works. For when Paul wrote that in **Ephesians 2** he was talking about works of the law, works done to earn merit towards salvation.

But when **James** wrote that, **You see then how that by works a man is justified and not by faith only (James 2:24)** he was talking about works of faith --- i.e. works springing from the obedience that the Gospel of Christ demands.. If you say you have faith in God and in His Son, then you must express that faith in obedient action --- repentance, faith in Christ’s word and sufficiency through his death and resurrection, water baptism, etc.. Mere profession of faith without godly practice is no more help than a rotting corpse that cannot help anybody, says James.

The Bible makes it quite clear that **the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5)** is a work of God: When the people asked Jesus, **“What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?”** our Lord replied, **“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom He has sent” (John 6: 28-29).** According to Jesus, faith in him as God’s Son is a saving work of God.

So, is it possible that Jesus’ intercessory prayer for his sheep might fail? Part of the answer is found in the **Epistle to the Hebrews**. There is no NT book that teaches so fully the present intercessory ministry of Christ for His church. As our Great High Priest, our Lord Jesus is at the right hand of His God and Father praying for us that our faith not fail. But does this mean we will automatically be kept eternally secure without due attention on our part? Does it mean that no sheep can stray and be lost? Does Jesus’ intercession for his sheep guarantee that none will perish in the meantime?

Let the same **Book of Hebrews** answer for us. As well as supplying huge encouragement that Jesus is interceding for us --- no less than he prayed for Peter --- the same book sounds out the most dire warnings that we must not fail in our part.

**For this reason we must pay the more earnest heed to what we have heard, let us drift away (Heb. 2: 1).**

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance*, Westcott, Missouri, 1960, p 170

Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God (Heb. 3:12).

He became the Author (source) of eternal life unto all those who [are] obey[ing] him.

Many more such warnings could be cited. But the point is clear. God keeps those sheep who stay loyal. The promise of Divine keeping is contingent on our continuing to surrender our lives to His grace. **Jesus promises conditional security! The Bible never promises *automatic* safety** regardless of our own walk.

### THIS IS HOW JESUS HIMSELF LIVED!

Even the Good Shepherd himself walked by this faith-principle; In his parable of the good Shepherd, he explains, “For this reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from me, but I lay it down on my own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from my Father” (v.17-18) .

So, even Jesus himself had to daily volunteer his life up to his God and Father! Even Jesus must take up his own cross every single day. Yes, the end result of that walk of faith was Calvary. But he took up his own cross every single day. The success of Jesus’ own mission depended upon his own on-going voluntary submission to his Father’s expressed will and commandment.

Jesus lived by faith in His Father’s promises. All through his life, Jesus never doubted that his Father would keep him. In his wilderness temptation he confessed that God would meet his need for bread if only he would live by every word that proceeds from God’s mouth.

At the very end, he never doubted that his Father would not abandon him to Sheol, but he prayed, “Father, into Your Hand I commit my spirit”. Thus, Jesus demonstrates the essential ingredient to remaining in the Father’s love. A true son of God always delights in the Father’s purpose for his life. And what was good for your Lord and master, is good for you and for me!

Are the sheep eternally safe and secure? Of course they are. No one can snatch out of Christ’s hand that sheep who continues to listen to and who continues to follow the good Shepherd. But it’s not *automatic* regardless of how we live. And it is Jesus’ Father Whose power is greater than all. The sheep are held by nothing less than the power of Almighty God through Christ.

So the real question is not: Are the sheep secure? (They are whilst ever they stay close to Jesus!) No, the real question is: Once a sheep always a sheep? (The Bible answer is that’s up to us!) Only those who hear his voice and follow his word, qualify as his safe and saved sheep. It’s in listening and following that we **shall never perish**.

Your eternal safety, my eternal salvation, is not *automatically* guaranteed. For ...

You are [being] kept by (nothing less than) **the power of God through faith!**

He became the Author (source) of eternal life unto all those who [are] obey[ing] him.

“My sheep are listening to My voice, and I know them, and they are following me; and I am giving the life of the Age to Come to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.”

