

# Guardian of the Soul

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Good morning. So I guess this isn't the friendly church that does the fish fries, it's the friendly church that does rummage sales. Now to scripture.
- We're reading from the book of 1 Peter chapter 2, verses 21 through 25, and then the book of John. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.
- He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When he was abused, he did not return abuse. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.
- He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that having died to sins, we might live for righteousness.
- By his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your soul.
- [ 1 : 1 3 ]     John 10. Very truly, I tell you, Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.
- The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice.
- He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.
- But they will never follow a stranger. In fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice. Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.
- Therefore, Jesus said again, Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them.
- [ 2 : 1 9 ]     I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.
- I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. This is the word of our Lord. Thanks be to God. So friends, let's pray together.
- Loving and gracious God, we are indeed grateful for this moment, grateful for this time. And as we join together this morning in the hearing of your word, as we've lifted our voices in praises and in prayer, Lord, please respond to us, move in each of us and give us what you know we need.
- Plant that seed in us that will grow and bear fruit for the honor and the glory of your name. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen. So, guardian of the soul, we're continuing through our sermon series called A Living Hope.
- And today, focusing on this idea of the guardian of our soul. But hear the whole verse, right? Because it talks about going astray like sheep, but we have returned to the shepherd and guardian of our soul.

[ 3 : 35 ] That's where that comes from. So with that being said, let me start with a question. You hear about going astray. So, who are you following these days? It's not a hard question, right?

Who are you following these days? I mean, we know what it means to follow people. You want to get to point B. You're starting at point A. If you want to get to point B and you don't know how to get there, someone else can lead you there.

So you choose to follow them, right? So, who are you following these days? So, you know, really? I heard a couple people say what we hope is the right answer.

It's kind of quiet. Kind of rumbled in there. You know, folks don't speak up with that full-throat answer yet. But we'll get there. Okay. We're going to trust. We're going to trust. We're going to get there.

So, the reason why I bring up this follow thing is the following piece, like I said, is kind of a pretty common sense definition. But in 2023, we also know follow has another meaning.

[ 4 : 34 ] So, for those of us who are on social media, we know that we also follow people there too, right? Now, the same thing is that these folks have influence on us. They take us different places.

We can go to different destinations depending on who we follow, right? That these folks speak into our lives. We give them certain influence. So, if they say something about an issue or if they say we should watch this or see this or not shop at this particular place, it has influence.

In other words, we follow them. Maybe not 100%, but we follow them. And again, that question still matters. Who are you following, right?

Because if you give folk that kind of influence in your life, then they're going to take you somewhere. Question is where?

And we want to spend a minute with this. Because we heard a really important verse today. Louis read for us. When we get into that piece in John, we hear Jesus say one of the things he's most known for, which is I have come so that people can have life to the full.

[ 5 : 48 ] And depending on your translation, you may have heard that as the life more abundantly. Right? How many of you would like more abundant life? Oh, people didn't hesitate on that one.

Folks jumped right on in with the more abundant life piece. But it's true. That's where we are right now. It's where we are right now.

Folks striving for a more abundant life. But let's talk about that concept. Because it obviously means something to those of you who responded so quickly. But the thing about the more abundant life, let me tell you what it is not.

We are not talking about material prosperity. We are not talking about wealth. So it's very easy to fall into that trap.

To think when you hear about abundance, you think more. Which is not wrong. I mean, that's what the word means. And there's a lot. But the key here is a lot of what? Because if you're thinking that following Jesus is just going to bring you all these new toys, then you've misunderstood.

[ 6 : 53 ] But there are those out there who believe that. Now, y'all have known me long enough to know. I'm not that pastor. Okay? I'm not that dude. Those folks who will, you know, one of those private jet, 10 Mercedes in the garage kind of dudes.

I'm not that dude. And so let's be clear about that. But that being said, you also shouldn't want that dude either. You shouldn't want to go to that place.

Because that's not who Jesus is. But when you hear this idea of a more abundant life, what are we talking about? If you really want to understand life more abundant the way God talks about it, I want you to hear some very familiar words.

And they fall into this image that goes with our sermon today. You'll recognize this as soon as I start. But I want you to hear it in the context of understanding what abundant life looks like from God's perspective.

The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters.

[ 7 : 58 ] He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil.

For you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

See, this thing about attaching abundance to material prosperity is part of the reason why we don't really have an abundant life. It's part of the reason why we end up stressed out and worried about the wrong things.

Because God's vision of an abundant life is one where you have enough. You heard that in the psalm. It's not that the person is wanting. They have enough. But the things that people's souls really need.

[ 9 : 07 ] The things that our hearts really long for. The things our minds really seek. Peace. Contentment. Freedom from fear and anxiety.

That happens when you let God lead. When you seek the more abundant life with God's vision.

And not the vision of the world. And that's important because as we've heard in the reading today. This image of the shepherd is one that's all over our scriptures for today.

You see it in the representation on your bulletin and in the slide that we've been using. And that's important for us because if you think about what we've been talking about to this point.

Looking for the more abundant life. In other words, our point B that we're trying to get to. The more abundant life. And we think about, well, who do you follow to get to that place?

[ 10 : 05 ] The answer should be pretty readily obvious. But we get lost in that. We get confused. And Jesus is explaining this to folks.

Because when we get into this passage from John. There's some debate about whether Jesus is speaking directly to what happens in John 9 or not. Because if you look at John 9.

What you see is that story of him healing the man who was blind from birth in the temple. And what you see this open with is you Pharisees, right? So that's why people think he's speaking directly to that moment.

But there's also a reason that he may not be. But you don't need that piece. Understand this, though. What Jesus is trying to communicate to everybody is what it means to lead people well.

Because he's saying you guys aren't doing these things. Here's what a real leader does. Here's what the true shepherd does for his people. That's what Jesus is trying to communicate.

[ 11 : 09 ] And what he also says is this idea of that I'm the true shepherd. And the people who understand that God is at work in their lives are like sheep who recognize their shepherd's voice.

See, back then, when there were these sort of common pens and everybody kept their sheep kind of in one spot. What sheep would learn is either through a certain song or the shepherd's voice.

Is when that person showed up, those individual sheep who were familiar with that, they would follow that guy. Not anybody else. And that's what Jesus is trying to say.

If you're out here looking for the things that only Jesus can give, do you recognize Jesus' voice when you hear it? In other words, who are you following?

Let's take that further. Because what Jesus gets into is this idea of saying that I am the gate for the sheep. And that sounds like a weird one, right? Why would he talk about being the gate?

[ 12 : 14 ] But think about what the gate means, right? So if you've got this pen and you've got a gate on it and it's the only way in or out. So what happens at the gate? That means anybody who's going to come in to the sheep has to go through it.

Right? And so if somebody's going to influence the sheep, if somebody's going to try and lead the sheep, they've got to go through the gate. In other words, do the people you listen to in your life, do they sound like Jesus?

Do they produce fruit that looks like Jesus? Are they taking you to places that are actually the life more abundant? Or are they adding to your stress and your worry and problems?

I am the gate for the sheep. And if people aren't passing through that filter well, then maybe you ought to be following somebody else.

The other thing about the gate is that if the sheep are going to go out to pasture, go out into where all the resources are, the water, those hills we were talking about, those quiet waters that bring peace to your souls.

[ 13 : 26 ] You've got to go through the gate. In other words, the way to that place, the way to that contentment, the way to that peace, the way to those resources is through Jesus.

Nowhere else. And often we forget that part. And yet we wonder why we go around unsatisfied. That's our challenge right now.

If we really want life more abundant, remember what life more abundant means from God's point of view, not the world's point of view. And then who's the person who can really get you there?

Because if you're following people who aren't taking you in that direction, why are you surprised you're not there? See, the thing is we know how to follow people, right?

Like if you and your friends are going somewhere and they say, well, you don't know the direction, say, well, follow me. I'll take you there. If you jump into your three or four cars and y'all following each other, you know what to do, right?

[ 14 : 31 ] You know how hard you work to make sure that car doesn't get out of your line of sight. You know what happens if that person goes through a yellow light, right? What you going to do?

Right? We know how this works. But friends, hear me on this. Is that if you follow in Jesus, do you work just as hard to make sure that you follow Jesus like that?

What's your prayer life like to make sure that you are listening to him? What's your study life like so that you recognize him and what he's about? What conversations are you having with people?

Are they enriching your understanding of who Jesus is, what he's looking for, and what his dream for people is? Are you who are you following?

And then, if you lay down and put your head on the pillow at night and wonder why you're still battling so much stress, so much anxiety, you still feel so discontent with things, who'd you follow that day?

[ 15 : 43 ] Who? Who? Who? Who? Who? Who? See, this is what this is about. If you want to get to that life more abundant, if you want to look for what really matters in life, then you've got to be careful about where you're letting yourself be led.

The other part of this message is just that. How well are you letting yourself actually be led? Because that's the interesting thing about following, is when you're following somebody, you don't get to tell them where you're supposed to go.

But that's also what a lot of us do, right? That we keep doing what we want to do and telling Jesus, hey, bless this, as opposed to letting Jesus lead us to what he knows real blessing is.

If you would have life more abundant, if you would live life to the full, listen to that verse again, stop going astray like sheep.

Return to the true shepherd, the one who is actually the guardian of your soul. He's shown you that he has your best interest at heart.

[ 17 : 08 ] He took away the sin debt that you can't pay on your own. He taught you the truths of God instead of the lies of the world. He broke the power of death.

He's the one who's next to you when no one else will be. He's the one that's leading you to the place that he knows is the right place instead of all these other things we go chasing. You know, the funny thing is, I have two dogs, and they're knuckleheads, but I love them.

The reason why I say they're knuckleheads is partly because they're mine, but also because they have to be either pinned in or on a leash. Right? Some of y'all know what I'm talking about.

I would love to be able to take them to the park, and I see these other pet owners who are able to just let their dogs run around. My guys ain't in that place yet. They're just not. If I take them off their leash, I'm going to have to chase them in the street.

I'm going to have to follow them all over the world. Right? And the risk that they will do, they will get themselves hurt. Right? But it brings us back to that point of you have to be humble enough to let yourself be led.

[ 18 : 19 ] We don't like a leash, just the same way my two guys don't like being on a leash. They really hate it. But we also know it happened. And what might happen to them if they are not?

Are you humble enough to let Jesus lead you? Or are you going to insist on doing what you want to do and end up having to face the consequences?

Jesus has shown you that he is the true guardian of your soul. Trust him with that. So friends, no matter what you are facing today, no matter what that problem is that seems too big for you to get by, no matter what that situation is that's producing so much fear and stress and worry in your spirit, if you are going to get through it, if you would know your way around it, if you would know how to handle it properly, don't keep going astray like sheep.

Return to the good shepherd, the one who really is the guardian of your soul. Amen? And amen. Loving and gracious God, we do thank you that you have shown us the way.

And we know that we will have to follow you even when it challenges us, even when we must humble ourselves, even when it is truly uncomfortable. But we know that you have our best interests.

[ 19 : 50 ] We know that you come from a love that cannot be measured as we try and walk this life. So Lord, let us follow. Let us follow joyfully and humbly.

Let us focus on you the same way we focus on other times we have to follow so that we can go to where you would lead us, that life more abundant as you describe it and promise.

In Jesus' name we pray and ask. Amen. So we continue our journey to the life more abundant. But we have to be willing to follow the only one who can get us there.

Humble yourself and trust and focus and let him take you where he wants you to be, where he knows you need to go. As you think about the ways in which you might put your faith into action this week, please study your bulletin, but also understand that there are some Bible studies coming up.

We have a women's Bible study on Wednesday, our Bible study on Thursday on Adam Hamilton's book of Luke. Tough stuff will be at the end of May. We had a great conversation this week. You ought to talk to some other folks who've been there to find out what a great time we're having as we deal with some really controversial stuff.

[ 20 : 59 ] Other thing you want to look at is meetings of our intergenerational angel wings group. We also have a feeding hope meal coming up and that's also discussed in your bulletin as well. There are other opportunities.

Let God lead you into the ways in which you might be part of the body of Christ. Put your faith into action. Now let us receive our benediction. Lord, we know that you are leading us to that place, that place where we can understand all of those gifts that you have in store.

Lord, let us be humble enough to follow because you are truly the guardian of our soul. And now in the name of God, our creator and king, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, our counselor and our sustainer.

May God bless us as we leave to love and serve God and all God's children. Amen.