"I Am the Door"

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So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture."

(John 10:7–9)

The tenth chapter of John's Gospel is well known and fondly remembered as the Good Shepherd passage, so I want to focus on the lesser known and hardly remembered first part, in which we find the third "I am" saying of Jesus. Jesus uses this imagery of a sheep gate, or door, when he says, "I am the door" (John 10:7, 9).

We walk through doors every day. Leaving the house this morning, we had to walk out our front, back, side, or garage door. To get to work or the grocery store, we walked through a door. Doors give us access to enter into a new place. So if Jesus says "I am the door," what is Jesus saying he's the doorway to? As we study this passage, two things become clear: Jesus says, "I am the door *to salvation*" and "I am the door *to safety*."

"I Am the Door to Salvation"

The context of John 10 immediately follows the story of a blind man whose eyesight Jesus restores. This story reveals that it is the seeing Pharisees who were, in reality, blind; and it was the blind man who could truly see—not with his eyes, but with ears of faith (John 9:1–41).

John 10 continues to build on this thought, which is why John writes in verse 6, "This figure of speech Jesus used with *them*, but *they* did not understand what he was saying to *them*." "They" and "them" refer to the Pharisees, who were full of unbelief (that is, they were spiritually blind). So when Jesus uses the imagery of a door and a shepherd to talk about how he cares for his people, he simultaneously reveals how the Pharisees, the under-shepherds of Israel, have failed in their spiritual care, leadership, stewardship, and oversight (see John 10:8; Ezek. 34:2–4). When Jesus uses this figure of speech of being the door, he explains, "If anyone enters by me, he will be saved."

Not many of us reading *Modern Reformation* are farmers or sheep herders, and even if some of us are, modern conventions have changed how we care for sheep. So let me put this into perspective. The door he's talking about isn't like the hinged doors we normally use. Jesus was referring to a small opening in a sheep pen, in which a circle of rocks was piled high to form a wall that would protect sheep from predators at night. This sort of sheep pen didn't have an actual door. It was open, and at night the shepherd would keep the sheep inside and keep predators outside by lying down across the open space. By sleeping there, the shepherd became the door to the sheep.

Now this imagery teaches us a lot about the Christian faith. There is only *one door*. It's *the* door and not *a* door. There is only *one* way to salvation. Acts 4:12 teaches, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Later in John's Gospel, Jesus reiterates, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). In other words, there are not many doors or entrances or different ways to heaven, but just *one* door. What we see here is that Christianity is an *exclusive* religion. Jesus goes so far as to say that if anyone tries to enter by a different way, then he is a thief or a robber.

Jesus is the only door for salvation. That's not going to be a popular message in our culture. In fact, it never has been a popular teaching. When Christianity came onto the world stage, it upset Rome because it pledged allegiance to God alone. Christians weren't bowing down to Caesar as lord and ultimate sovereign. In America, we may still pledge allegiance as "one nation, under God," but the definition of that "God" is open to interpretation and not exactly the Holy Trinity. Not to mention the fact that our culture is probably less open to exclusive claims than Rome was. "What's true for you isn't true for me." This is called "relativism," meaning that there is no absolute truth. Truth is what's true *for you*—it's subjective. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis helpfully confronted this idea back in his day:

> Whenever you find a man who says he doesn't believe in a real right and wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later. He will break his promise to you, but if you try breaking one to him he'll be complaining "it's not fair" before you can say Jack Robinson. ([New York: HarperOne, 2009], 6.)

When you really push someone on this, they'll budge. The thing about Christianity is that it might be *exclusive*—that is, it teaches that Jesus is the only way to salvation—but it's open to anyone and everyone regardless of social class, status, gender, or age. Jesus says, "I am the door," but he also opens wide that door by saying, "If anyone enters by me, he will be saved." Christianity might be exclusive, but it's open to everyone. The gospel is for everybody. Jesus is the door, and he has opened the way of access for us to God the Father. The reason we need him and no one else is because we are sinful, and we need Jesus to become sin for us so we can receive his perfect record before God.

It's not an accident that Jesus compares entering through the door, which is easy, with trying to enter in other ways, which are difficult. Thieves and robbers have to climb up over the wall. That's hard work, and it's no legitimate way to enter. But coming through Jesus is legitimate, and it's easy. As Jesus says in Matthew 11:30, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." It's easy because Jesus laid down his life for us. It's easy because Jesus bore the burden for us. If we go any other way, we'll never get in. But if we go through Jesus, we have the way. He becomes our door to salvation. That's salvation in the past, present, and future—the guilt of sin, the power of sin, and the tyranny of sin are all thwarted and overthrown in the cross of Christ. He is the door for our justification, sanctification, and glorification. But that's only the first part of the meaning.

"I Am the Door to Safety"

The second part is that Jesus promises safety to all who trust in him. So far we've read that Jesus says, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved," which is why Jesus is the door to our salvation, but Jesus is also the door to our safety. The verse continues to say, "he will be saved *and will go in and out and find pasture*" (v. 9).

I don't know everyone's story reading this article, but I do know that there are at least a few who have experienced a real threat to their safety. Maybe you've been held at gunpoint, or maybe you almost lost your life in a car accident. About fifteen years ago, when I was snowboarding with my younger cousin, we fell off the face of the mountain—a massive drop that should have killed us. Thankfully, it had snowed heavily the night before, so we landed in a cloud of powder—a soft pillow landing instead of instant death.

But if any of us has ever been in danger, hearing words that Jesus will provide us with safety can sound a lot like a false promise. If we've been in a situation where we weren't protected, or we were vulnerable and something happened that should never have happened—especially if there is a God who is benevolent—then hearing these words might make us feel frustrated at best and furious at worst.

What do we do with verses like this when our experience—our reality—doesn't match up with it? What happens when we are not safe, when we're in a situation that could lead to our harm or death, or if we've already suffered and survived the unbearable—where God was nowhere to be found in our pain and time of need? How is this comforting? How can this even be true?

The answer to that question is this: We will always be safe in the care and protection of Jesus—period. The apostle Paul, who was no novice to suffering (beaten, nearly whipped to death three times, and even shipwrecked), says in Romans 8:38–39:

> For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul was sure that not even death itself could keep us from the hands of God's protection. If we are in Christ, then we are in the safest place we can and will ever be. That's a lot easier to say when we're in a relatively safe country, inside of a safe building, reading a magazine; but it's true no matter where we find ourselves. If we trust in money, comfort, possessions, position, or power to help us feel secure, then we're never going to find safety. Wealth can run dry. Comfort can change. A lowered economic status takes away the luxury. Possessions can be stolen or destroyed.

But this is true even when we've been through agony—because we have the greatest sympathizer of our agony in the One who willingly suffered agony for our sake on the cross. In Christ, God is not silent in our pain, but he screams out with us in our hurt. In Christ, God has silenced suffering and promised to put an end to all pain. In Christ, God promises that he will always keep us safe and sound.

The tenth chapter of John calls each one of us to find safety in Jesus—to find safety in the God who promises to give his sheep the ability to go freely in and out of pasture. This is reminiscent of Psalm 23, where the psalmist famously wrote, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (v. 4). That is a comfort—a safety—that no one can ever take away from us. There is nowhere safer. So, come through the door and find safety in Jesus. Come and find safety in the Good Shepherd who was willing to lay down his own life for his sheep. Come and find safety in the Christ who went all the way to the cross to be the door that gives us access to God.

By illustrating himself as the door, Jesus is talking about *substitution*. He's talking about the shepherd taking the place of the sheep, and taking on the danger and harm that was coming their way. Through his substitutionary death on the cross, Jesus became the sacrificial lamb who was willing and able to stand in our place. Through faith in Jesus, we stand safe.

Five chapters later in John 15:13, Jesus would say to his disciples, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." This is precisely what God has done for us in his Christ. Jesus is the door because, unlike a hired hand, he puts his own life on the line to protect and care for his sheep.

The way is easy, and the door is still open. Come through the door.

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