



BY MICHAEL PRIEST

Abundantly

THE MEANING

Two men visiting the Orthodox Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives. The Jews believe that when the Messiah comes, He will raise the dead; the resurrected Jews will follow Him through the Eastern Gate. Tradition dictates, therefore, that persons are buried in this cemetery with their feet facing the Eastern Gate, which is right across the valley. Jesus understood that Jews in His day thought of eternal life with a future-focused understanding. He explained that He was offering more than that—He could offer joy and peace in this life as well.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: MICHAEL RUTHERFORD (89/1334)

SPEAKING WITH A UNIFIED MESSAGE, prosperity preachers have long advocated that God wants believers to have “the best.” Even today, pastors and evangelists preach that God wants us to be healthy, wealthy, and happy. Using verses like John 10:10, “A thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance,”¹ they claim the Bible supports their prosperity theology.

Even though these prosperity preachers may be well intentioned, I am convinced they are wrong. If they are wrong, then how are we to understand verses like John 10:10? What did Jesus mean when He said He came to give abundant life?

Background

The English word “abundance” derives from the Greek word *perissos*, an ancient word with a meaning consistent over time. The earliest extant use of the word is from Hesiod, a 7th century B.C. Greek poet. In Hesiod’s writings, the word meant “exceeding the usual number or size,” a meaning that remained consistent throughout the period of the Greek poets, in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament), and into the period of the New Testament.²

Although the meaning remained consistent, nuances could differ. For example, a person could use *perissos* positively to speak of something or someone who was especially noteworthy. This was the case when Jesus said of John the Baptist, “What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and far more [*perissos*] than a prophet” (Luke 7:26). The same word could refer to evil excess. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “But let your word ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’ Anything more [*perissos*] than this is from the evil one” (Matt. 5:37). *Perissos* could also refer to something superfluous. Paul used the word this way when he penned, “Now concerning the ministry to the saints, it is unnecessary [*perissos*] for me to write to you” (2 Cor. 9:1).³ The nuanced uses demonstrate the word’s varied connotations, but they also demonstrate that the basic definition remained the same. *Perissos* meant “more than usual or beyond the expected norm.”

Context

When studying a passage, knowing the meaning of words is important,

but remembering that words function in context is equally important. In order to understand *perissos* in John 10:10, considering the context is vital. In John 9, the Jewish religious leaders proved they were more interested in their status and the man-made laws of their religion than they were in caring for the people’s needs. Having observed their behavior, Jesus likely thought back to Ezekiel 34, a passage in which God compared Israel’s spiritual leaders to selfish shepherds and the people to sheep. The Lord charged these religious leaders with using and abusing the sheep for personal profit. That is exactly how Jesus viewed the religious leaders of His day.

Consequently, in John 10, using well-known shepherding practices as the backdrop, Jesus introduced a metaphor in which He contrasted the leaders of His day to Himself. Jesus began by identifying the leaders as illegitimate shepherds; the gatekeeper had not given them access to the sheep (John 10:1-4). They were thus nothing more than thieves and robbers, abusing and using the people for personal gain. Jesus, on the other hand, had received from the gatekeeper rightful access to the sheep—and was the Good Shepherd. He knew the sheep, they knew Him, and He cared for them (vv. 5-15).

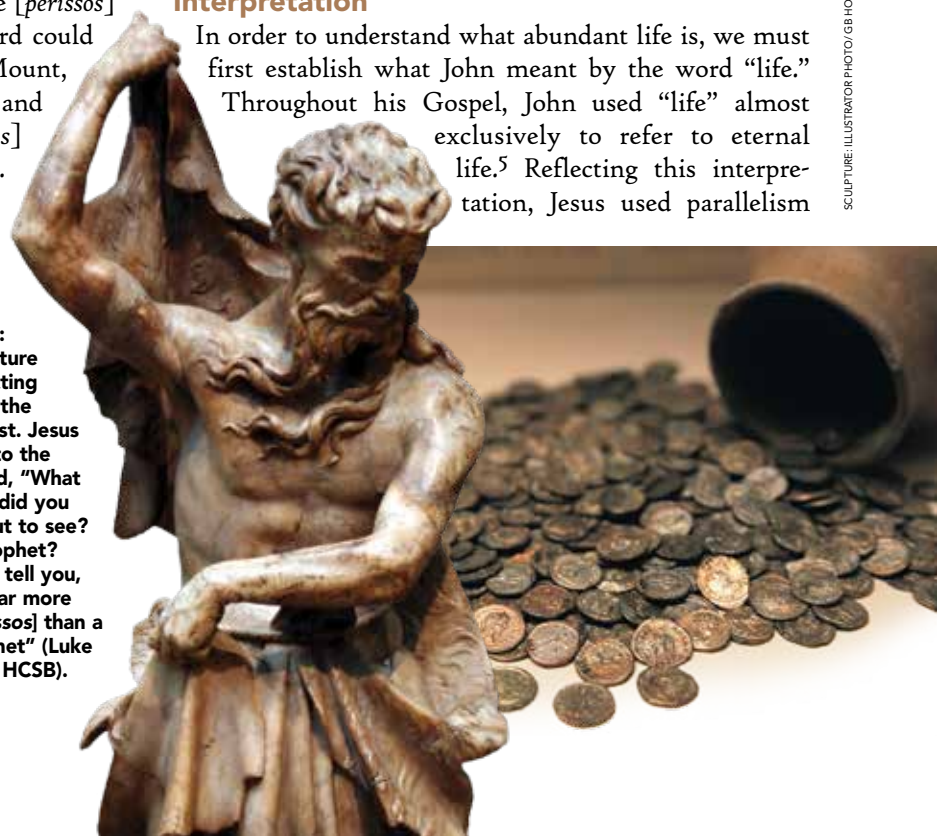
Building off the common practice of shepherds lying in the entrance to the sheep pen,⁴ Jesus extended the metaphor by calling Himself the door of the sheep (vv. 7-10). He was clear; no one entered the sheep pen except through Him. Whoever entered through Him was given life and given it in abundance (*perissos*).

Interpretation

In order to understand what abundant life is, we must first establish what John meant by the word “life.”

Throughout his Gospel, John used “life” almost exclusively to refer to eternal life.⁵ Reflecting this interpretation, Jesus used parallelism

Right:
Sculpture depicting John the Baptist. Jesus said to the crowd, “What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and far more [*perissos*] than a prophet” (Luke 7:26, HCSB).





Between the ancient ruins at Heshbon and the modern residential area is a stonewall sheep pen. Inside is a black water storage container. On the far side part of the wall, toward the left side is the opening, the gate, where the sheep

would enter. Jesus explained that He is the door to the sheep. Heshbon, in modern Jordan, was a Moabite city ruled by King Sihon in the days of Moses. During the conquest, the city was part of the tribal allotment of Gad.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (60/8325)

to help explain life as eternal life and further, to explain what abundant life is. In verse 9, He said, “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved.” In the next sentence He said, “I have come so that they may have life” (v. 10). Jesus was saying, “he will be saved” is synonymous or parallel with “that they may have life.” So “to be saved” is “to have life”—and both phrases refer to eternal life.⁶ In order to be saved and have life one must come through Jesus, the door. He is the only point of access for eternal life.

Jesus also said, “If anyone enters by Me, he will... come in and go out and find pasture” (v. 9). He went on to say, “I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance” (v. 10). Again, using parallelism, Jesus used “come in and go out and find pasture” as synonymous with “have [life] in abundance.” “Come in and go out and find pasture” in no way implies a person can go into and out of eternal life. Instead, building off of the shepherding analogy, Jesus was pointing out that just as a

shepherd was responsible for providing pastureland for the sheep, He, the Good Shepherd and the door, would provide abundant (*perissos*) life for His followers.

Jesus was explaining that as the Good Shepherd, He gives *eternal life*. The people of His day understood this to be participation in the age to come—and thus future focused only.

But Jesus went beyond that traditional understanding to say He also gives life in abundance (*perissos*)—beyond the usual or expected. Jesus was saying that abundant life is more than just participating in the age to come in heaven.⁷ It involves life here and now. It is a relationship with God here and now. It is the satisfied life, life with meaning and purpose, life with contentment. It is a Psalm 23 kind of life born out of the recognition that the Good Shepherd takes care of His sheep.⁸ Thus we do not have to face life’s difficulties by ourselves or in our own strength. Instead we can walk with Him, in the fullness of His strength, grace, love, peace, presence, and forgiveness. We can live a life full of joy here and now. That is an abundant (*perissos*) life! 🐏

Left: Cache of 429 silver coins, found near Sulakyurt in the Central Anatolia region of Turkey; one of the coins comes from the mint of Calvarea. Many misinterpret Jesus’ teachings on abundance, focusing on material gain.

1. All Scripture quotations come from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
2. “περισσός” (*perissos*, abundant) in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1979), 651.
3. Friedrich Hauck, “περισσός, ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ, ὑπερεκπερισσῶς” (*perissos*, abundant) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 61-62.
4. George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *John*, vol. 36 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 169-70.
5. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 82-83.
6. *Ibid.*, 507-08.
7. Andreas J. Kostenberger, “John” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, gen. ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 2:101.
8. Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 375.

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