

We turn for our summer Bible notes to some of *the neglected pastoral texts in Scripture*. Why we fail to notice God's shepherding arm in Scripture is not hard to see. We fail to see God shepherd our lives and carry us through this dangerous world.

The invention of electricity has led humankind to rule the night as we rule the day, the ability to dispel darkness leading to our sense of mastery over the world, but "in the process it alienated many of us from the natural world. We spend more of our waking hours under bright lights than we do in God's world of blue skies and green grass."

Harold Kushner, *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm*

On a human level, we fail to appreciate the awe of real darkness and refuse to admit our lack of control of the *natural* world. But on the spiritual plane, we are even more unappreciative of God's promise to lead us into green pastures, beside still waters, and even through the valley of the Shadow of Death (Psalm 23). In the desert which we create through our sinful rebellion, we do not welcome by faith God's coming to us as a Shepherd in our spiritual exile. The closest we come to such an experience of wandering in the desert is on a SUV commercial where we imagine ourselves driving up desert cliffs! No wonder we have lost the wonder of this great Gospel proclamation in Isaiah 40:9:

Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!"

This week we will explore how our misguided sense of mastery over the world leads us *to undervalue Christ's shepherd's grip* – especially in deep trouble. Give thanks that the Shepherd is committed to snatching us from the roaring lion and saving our flesh and blood which He took to Himself. (Heb 2:16).

Monday: Read Isaiah 40:27-31

Shepherd of the Exiles

We aim this week to rectify our tendency towards ignorance *of the places where God shepherds us*. Turning again to Isaiah 40, we meditate on one of the most important Old Testament pictures of God's shepherding care. Let's ask God to help us link some of the key verses of this chapter together to see our God as the Shepherd-King who comes to rescue us in desolation and despair.

The first place we turn to is the end of the chapter.

Today, let us put ourselves in the shoes of those to whom Isaiah 40 was first addressed—the exiles of Israel and Judah. This was a future generation for Isaiah, who wrote nearly two hundred years earlier. He knew this would be a demoralized people consisting mainly of the descendants of the people who had been captured by Assyria and Babylon. It would be hard for them to imagine that they would ever go home, as they had grown up outside the Holy Land. They would find it difficult to believe their covenant Lord could rescue them, for He had not prevented Assyria or Babylon from capturing their forefathers Dr. R.C. Sproul, *Tabletalk* magazine, 4/9/13.

Meditate and Pray: Exile, the painful consequence of their sins, made these children in Babylon and Assyria despair that God could ever rescue them. Have you ever been lost, really lost? The sense of *not being able to be found* can be overwhelming! But to these exiles the Lord gives the answer”

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength. Isaiah 40:27-29:

Sing about this great Shepherding power, and God’s ability to find us when no one else can, using hymn # 416 in our *Trinity Hymnal*:

1 Gracious Savior, gentle Shepherd,
our little ones are dear to thee;
gathered with thine arms and carried
in thy bosom may they be
sweetly, gently, safely tended,
from all want and danger free.

2 Tender Shepherd, never leave them
from thy fold to go astray;
by thy look of love directed,
may they walk the narrow way;
thus direct them, and protect them,
lest they fall an easy prey.

3 Let thy holy Word instruct them:
fill their minds with heav'nly light;
let thy love and grace constrain them,
to approve whate'er is right,
take thine easy yoke and wear it,
and to prove thy burden light.

4 Cleanse their hearts from sinful folly
in the stream thy love supplied;
mingled streams of blood and water
flowing from thy wounded side:
and to heav'nly pastures lead them,
where thine own still waters glide.

Tuesday: Read Isaiah 40:9-11 & Isaiah 40:21-27

All Things in Our Shepherd

The Lord reveals Himself as the Shepherd who knows His way through the desert. *He can find lost sheep*, no matter how lost in the wilderness they are! Just watch this Shepherd work to regain His own!

One of the qualities of a real shepherd handling a flock is how *decisive* he is in every movement for the sheep’s benefit. He knows just how to command the sheepdogs to the right place. He knows just how to spot a lame or sick member of his flock and draw that one aside for personal attention, even if they are initially very difficult to spot and then hard to snatch with his rod and staff!

This is the picture given to us in Isaiah 40:9-11 -- the Lord coming to seek and find His sheep – even in the far-off desert of exile. We are to drink in this pastorally complete picture of our Divine Shepherd, to magnify our Savior as, “THE great Shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:20).

Our helpless situations should cause us every moment to look upward to the horizon, expecting to see our faithful Shepherd-Savior, coming to find us in our lost condition. Isaiah seeks to get our attention, to move us to appreciate God as our Shepherd in the wilderness.

Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”
Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.
Isaiah 40:9-11

Meditate and Pray: Here is the Good News. So good, in fact, that Isaiah in God’s name urges the messenger to boldly cry out, “Behold your God!”

The messenger is to be bold; he is to raise his voice that all may hear. The Church is not to keep this message to herself but is to present it to Judah’s cities with a holy boldness ... She must be vigorously and militantly evangelistic... Isaiah states the content of the message in simple terms, Behold! Your God. The interjection arrests the attention, drawing it to the message itself. The cities of Judah are stopped, as it were, that they might see their God before them... In these words is found the heart of the Gospel, “the sum of our happiness” as Calvin puts it, “which consists solely in the presence of God.”

This is the great theme of the remainder of the prophecy; it is the very center of the Gospel. If we have not God, we have nothing; and if we have Him we have all things.

E.J. Young, *Commentary on Isaiah*

Wednesday: Read Isaiah 40:9-11 & 1 Samuel 17:31-37

Out of the Lion’s Mouth

I don’t know if you have ever seen a skilled shepherd with livestock. We are thinking this week of such a shepherd’s ability to handle sick sheep, to expertly pick up wounded lambs and carry them.

Our Divine Shepherd has a mastery of our lives. He is able to lay His hands of powerful, caring sovereign skill upon us whenever He desires to help us. We have a misguided sense of mastery over the world which leads us *to undervalue Christ’s firm shepherd’s grip* – especially when we are in deep trouble. Give thanks that He is committed to snatching us from the mouth of the roaring lion and to saving our flesh and blood since He took it to Himself in the incarnation (Hebrews 2:16).

Such powerful, confident, “hands-on” shepherding on Christ’s part was foreshadowed by David, the great king of Israel. When embattled king Saul heard of David’s courageous words against the Philistine giant Goliath, he called the shepherd-boy to him. David’s reasoning as to the *secret* of his shepherding skill is simple. Just as the Lord enabled him to snatch wounded lambs from the mouths of lions and bears, so he believed the Lord would deliver Goliath to him, bringing deliverance for all Israel.

Meditate and Pray: Give thanks for the strong, shepherding grip of our Savior. He is able to stretch out His arm and snatch us from the sure spiritual defeat which Satan plans and which sin enables. Thank the Lord that His reach is never too short to rescue us just at our time of need!

Thursday: Read Hebrews 2:14-18 & Matthew 14:28-31

The Shepherd Takes Hold

When we are sinking in temptation, despair, and sin, Christ’s power to find us is prompt, consistent, and successful. Have you ever seen a lamb or an exhausted ewe try to rescue themselves from a raging flood or dangerous mud? Well, the Lord Jesus has compassion upon those struggling and sinking without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). His arm is *always long enough to reach us*, just as He reached down and rescued Peter from sinking in the water (Matthew 14:31). The verb which describes our Lord “taking hold” of Peter, as he was sinking, is the same verb used to describe Jesus’ taking our flesh and blood as His own in the incarnation in Hebrews 2:16. That is how strong a hold Christ took on our human nature, and why He can so deeply sympathize with us in our every temptation and trial.

What, then, is the result? The Valley of the Shadow of Death is when all our strength and comfort fall away. Since we have a Shepherd with such a strong grip, our fear in the face of death should decrease. Satan formerly held us in bondage to such a fear of death (Hebrews 2:15) but Christ’s grip is so strong as to reach us even there! Even in the valley of the shadow, we shall fear no evil.

Meditate and Pray: Give thanks by faith as you make this wonderful conclusion about Christ’s shepherding care – His arm can reach us to rescue and comfort us, even in the grave. Sing about this in this Welsh hymn:

Here is love, vast as the ocean, lovingkindness as the flood: when the Prince of Life, our ransom, shed for us His precious blood.
Who His love will not remember? Who can cease to sing His praise? He can never be forgotten throughout heaven’s eternal days.

On the morn of resurrection, mercy filled the thirsty grave; where the stone of death burst open, springs of life flowed unrestrained.
Love no heart could ever measure, joy no sorrows will out-run, rush upon the soul believing in the risen, reigning Son.
William Rees (1847)

Fri/Sat/Sun: Read Hebrews 10:19-25 & Hebrews 12:1-2

Enjoying Green Pastures

The ultimate measure of our Good Shepherd is that he is able to bring his flock all the way to safe pasture and a permanent place of salvation in which to safely abide. This safe passage into our eternal pasture and sheep-fold is a good metaphor for the whole of the life of faith, being safely tended by our Shepherd the Lord Jesus all the way into the gates of eternal life.

No wonder the New Testament celebrates our final access into our full inheritance in glory. As 2 Peter 1:10-11 put it (especially in **bold print**):

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you **an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**

But at the same time, we as sheep *can already enjoy this safe passage*. We already know and experience the safety of lying down safely in the fold which our Good Shepherd provides for our souls.

For example, in Hebrews 10:19-25, the writer of that book presents the *access which we already now possess* as proof that our spiritual inheritance is superior to the old covenant and to the Judaism to which his readers were tempted to return. Since the Roman empire tolerated Jews as a legal religion, while ostracizing the tiny Christian church through persecution, the Jewish Christians to whom Hebrews was written were tempted to retreat from their Christian profession into the familiar and safe confines of the sacrificial religion founded in Jerusalem.

Hebrews rebukes this longing to return to visible signs of community which pre-A.D. 70 Jerusalem provided. *We already have access directly into the Holy of Holies*. Instead of depending on a priest only allowed access into God's direct presence once a year on the Day of Atonement, Hebrews 10 declares that the way is now open into God's presence for all who confess Christ as their Savior and Priest:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, **by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh**, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith. Hebrews 10:19-22

Meditate and Pray: We are to live our lives "upwards," that is, by setting our minds firmly on the heavenly glory of our Chief Shepherd. To "go in and out and to enjoy green pasture" is something we do *every time* we access Christ's heavenly mercy seat to find help "in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). This explains the exhortation in Scripture that we should "look up" to realize that our source of earthly comfort, strength, and hope resides in Heaven. Christ, on whom we fix our eyes of faith when we look up, is our life. He pours out that life upon us by continually providing us the graces and comforts of the Holy Spirit.

Satan is constantly trying to make us regard ourselves instead of Christ. He insinuates, "Your sins are too great for pardon; you have no faith; you do not repent enough; you will never be able to continue to the end; you have not the joy of his children; you have such a wavering hold of Jesus." All these are thoughts about self, and we shall never find comfort or assurance by looking within. But the Holy Spirit turns our eyes away from self: He tells us that we are

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nothing, but that “Christ is all in all.” Remember, therefore, it is not *your hold* of Christ that saves you—it is Christ; it is not *your joy* in Christ that saves you—it is Christ; it is not even faith in Christ, though that be the instrument—it is Christ’s blood and merits. Look not so much to your hand with which you are grasping Christ, as to Christ; look not to your hope, but to Jesus, the source of your hope; look not to your faith, but to Jesus, the author and finisher of thy faith. We shall never find happiness by looking at our prayers, our doings, or our feelings; it is what *Jesus* is, not what we are, that gives rest to the soul. If we would at once overcome Satan and have peace with God, it must be by “looking unto Jesus.”

(Hebrews 12:2)

Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*