

Lost and Found

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[0 : 00] The cross is the center of human history. The cross is the center of human history.

No serious historian denies that 2,000 years ago, a Jewish rabbi called Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem. Through the ages, thousands were executed by crucifixion. Their deaths, though horribly cruel, haven't changed the world. But the death of Jesus Christ on the cross has changed and continues to change the world. It is the center of human history. Why? Why is it so important that by faith we as individuals make the cross the center of our lives also?

The book of Isaiah was written over 600 years before the birth of Jesus. Isaiah 53 is arguably the most powerful chapter in the book, describing as it does the significance of the sufferings of the cross of Jesus. Someone once said that it was as if Isaiah in this chapter was standing underneath the cross, watching and writing as Jesus suffered and died. This chapter tells the story of the cross, but it also explains for us the significance of the cross. It tells us why Jesus died there, and it says it was for us. It was for us. Unlike the thousands of criminals the Romans executed by crucifixion, Jesus died a righteous man. He died not for any sins or wrongdoings of His own.

He died for us. He was crushed and forsaken for us. He suffered and died for us. In Isaiah 53 verse 6, we read these words, All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to His own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Is the cross of Jesus at the center of your life? Is your heart shaped like the cross on which Jesus died? This morning briefly, we want to notice three things from Isaiah 53 in verse 6.

[2 : 32] Straying sheep, sovereign shepherd, and suffering Savior. Straying sheep, sovereign shepherd, suffering Savior. Straying sheep, first of all. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. We have turned every one to His own way. What Isaiah says here applies to the whole human race, bar none.

We're all like sheep which have gone astray. We've all turned to our own way. Isaiah the prophet, of course, lived in days of shepherds and sheep. It was an image which was familiar to everyone.

Hardly a day would go by, even in the city of Jerusalem, where you wouldn't hear the bleating of sheep. They were led by shepherds. He'd spend days and nights outdoors with His flock, keeping them safe from predators and thieves, and ensuring they had good food to eat and good water to drink. He'd tend to the sick among them, and at lambing time, He'd make sure the lambs were delivered safely. The countryside was filled with sheep and shepherds, each hillside and valley, each field and stream. In the Old Testament, God is pictured as the shepherd of Israel.

The Israelites are compared to sheep and God their shepherd. This is especially true of how God provided for and led them through the desert for 40 years after their miraculous deliverance from Egypt. In Psalm 80 verse 1, we read these words, Hear, O shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph, Israel, like a flock. In Psalm 23, King David reflects on how the Lord is His shepherd, providing and protecting Him in the green pastures and in the dark valleys. But now Isaiah says to the people, all we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to His own way. No longer are those to whom Isaiah is writing, following God as members of His flock. They've gone astray. They're no longer following Him. They have turned to their own ways.

God may remain their shepherd, but they're acting as though they were not His sheep. They're leaving behind His loving protection. They're wandering away from His wise leading. At this time in history, Israel was straying from the God who loved them. Time and again, He had rescued them from those who had oppressed them. But rather than being thankful to Him, they strayed even further from Him. God had sent them prophets like Samuel and Elijah to bring them back to Himself. But they didn't listen. In and after the days of Isaiah, God sent them more prophets.

[5 : 43] But now they do not merely close their ears to these prophets. They kill these prophets. They wander and stray from the God who is their loving, wise, and strong shepherd.

Well, Dolly the sheep used to be the most famous sheep in Scotland. But she's been replaced by Fiona.

Fiona the sheep was found at the foot of a cliff on the Cromerty Firth area this year. No one knows how she got there. But there she was at the foot of the cliff, all by herself, for over two years.

By the time rescuers got to her, her woody coat had become so heavy she could hardly walk. She had wandered away from the rest of her flock and from the safe fields of the farmer who had owned her.

Now, Fiona may be an extreme example, but we've all seen sheep doing their thing. They wander. They go astray. It's in the nature of sheep. When you're driving between fields of sheep, you've got to be careful because there will be sheep who will have broken out of the field and are grazing beside the road just waiting to be splattered by a speeding car.

[6 : 56] Some experts in sheep say that they're really clever animals, and some experts in sheep say that they're really dumb animals, but both agree that sheep are animals.

In straying from the divine shepherd, the people of Israel were behaving like animals. But more than that, they're worse than animals. Sheep are unconsciously driven by their appetites to wander away from the flock. But Isaiah says, we have turned everyone his own way.

We have turned. It's in the nature of sheep to wander and stray, but it's in our nature as human beings to do something worse, to consciously, deliberately, and intentionally turn away from God. The people of Israel knew what they were doing when they didn't listen to the prophets and live faithfully to God. They knew exactly what they were doing. It was a premeditated turning away which made their crime against God all the more serious. Their conscious turning away from God would eventually lead to them rejecting, torturing, and crucifying God's precious Son, Jesus Christ.

The cross of Jesus represents their ultimate turning away from God, the ultimate side of defiance that they would not have Him as their shepherd, but go their own way, whatever the cost. They crucified the Son of God. They beat Him. They killed Him. The sheep turned on their good shepherd.

And went their own way. But we're no different. We're no different. Human nature is the same whether that nature is Jewish or Gentile. We're all born with a propensity to stray from God and turn away from Him to our own ways. We don't want to live under God's authority. We want to do our own thing and go our own way, whatever that way. How many people brought up in Christian homes consciously turned away from the faith of their parents? I remember speaking to one man. I met him in Canvas Lang.

[9 : 10] He'd lived there for nearly 60 years. I caught his accent as being from the west coast of the Western Niles. So, I started chatting to him. After a while, I asked him whether he ever went to church.

The expression in his face, which up until then had been quite friendly because we've been speaking about football, became very unfriendly. He told me that he'd been brought up in the free church.

And to quote him, I had enough of all that stuff in my youth. I had enough of all that stuff in my youth. Now, perhaps there were excesses in the highland church, but this man had been unable or probably unwilling to separate what was true from what was tradition. So, he'd run away from the north to get away from the church and from Christianity. I felt profoundly sorry for him because from that moment onwards, he wouldn't talk to me again. He was a sheep which had strayed. He had turned to his own way to get away from God. Many students coming to Glasgow from the first time from Christian homes start by attending church, but they soon fall away. The bright lights of student life in the city is, there's just too much of a temptation. The reality is, they just want to get away from God.

You know, we're no different from the wandering sheep of Israel. We want to say to God, we will not have you as king over us, no matter if that king should be a loving heavenly father who made us for himself, who loves us infinitely and wants our highest good. For all that you're here today, perhaps you're a student, for all that you're here today, are you straying from God in your heart?

Are you a student who during the week is living the *vida loca* in the bright lights of the city, but on Sunday is playing the part your parents expect you to? I have met hundreds like you over the years, and it never ends well. The cross of Jesus isn't at the center of your life, and for that reason, however good you look on the outside, inside you're straying like one of these sheep.

[11 : 40] For all that you may think you have many friends, you're like Fiona the sheep at the bottom of the cliff on the Cromarty Firth, all alone and desperately afraid without the divine shepherd to love you and to look after you. Oh, I had enough of all that stuff in my youth. Is that you today?

Straying sheep. Second, sovereign shepherd. Sovereign shepherd. Throughout the Bible, God is pictured as the shepherd of His people. So, in Psalm 23, the best-known song in the world, David writes, the Lord is my shepherd. God is our shepherd, but we have wandered from Him and turned away from Him. We have offered the ultimate insult, and the Jewish nation will in time kill His son.

What shall this sovereign shepherd do with His hate-filled sheep? He would be justified, would He not, in getting rid of them? They have, after all, become worthless beasts who will not follow Him or accept His loving care. He could not have loved them more than He did. He could not have done more for them than He has done. When they were slaves in Egypt, He rescued them. When they were captives in Babylon, He saved them. What more could He have done for them? But time and again, they have rebelled against Him. He loved them like children, but they wanted to kill their father. Isaiah's contemporary prophet, Hosea, pictures the Lord lovingly looking out over His people and poignantly saying of them, When Israel was a child, I loved them. And out of Egypt, I called my son. The more I called, the more they went away. They kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. He loved them, but for as often as

He called them, they turned away to foreign gods. The more He loved them, the more they hated Him. What shall He do with them? And what shall He do with those of us who say, oh, I've had enough of that stuff in my youth?

Those who are turning away from Him in our hearts. If God were like us, then surely He'd leave them to their own destructive devices. Surely His love for them would turn to hate for them, and He'd abandon us just like we've abandoned Him. But God is not like us. You will notice the way in which God's name is rendered here, the Lord, L-O-R-D in capital letters. He is the God whose love will not let us go. He is infinitely committed to us. He will not, and He cannot abandon us to our foolishness. We would, but He's not like us. He is the Lord, and He loves us more than we hate Him. He will not forsake us. He will find us. He will not leave us. He will look for us. I have a very close friend who at the moment is straying from her faith in the Lord. When I asked her to picture her relationship to God, she said to me that she feels as though she's sitting back to back with God, back to back with

[15 : 12] God. For all I feel her pain, she's wrong. She may have her back to God right now, but He's not got His back to her. She may have turned away from Him, but He is toward her, and always will be. His arms are outstretched, waiting for her to return. This is the nature of the Lord our God, to always love us even when we do not love Him. Are there any here today who are positioned with their backs to God? You're like sheep straying from Him. He does not have His back turned toward you, no matter what you have done. He's waiting with arms outstretched, looking for your return and longing to find you. The sovereign shepherd from whom we deserve nothing is the Lord Yahweh whose love will never let us go. He must do something to gather us from where we have strayed. He must save us because He loves us. He will not leave fear of the sheep at the bottom of that cliff, and He isn't sitting with His back to us. He is the sovereign shepherd who is an expert in finding lost sheep, in loading them onto His shoulders, and in bringing them home.

And as we shall see in our last point, the cross of Jesus is where He finds us. So, we have straying sheep, a sovereign shepherd, and then thirdly, suffering Savior. Suffering Savior.

What is a staggering paradox? Isaiah writes, And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

In His love, in His wisdom, and in His grace, the Lord, whose love will never let us go, found a way to find us. Literally, the Lord gave Him up to the iniquity of us all.

He gave up His Son to the cruelty and malice of those who hated Him. He delivered Him to the horror of the cross. Jesus, the perfect Son in whom there was no sin and who had never wandered or turned away from His Father, suffered and died on the cross for those who had gone astray and turned away from God.

[17 : 49] Throughout Isaiah 53, the sufferings of Jesus on the cross are highlighted. He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was smitten by God and afflicted.

He was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. With His stripes we are healed. The cross on which He died is where the Lord, our Shepherd, from whom we have strayed, finds us.

But at what cost? For no man has ever suffered like Jesus. All those patterns of unfaithfulness, all that sin and guilt, all that iniquity, all that separated us from God, it was given over to Jesus, and He died to take it away. It was laid on His shoulders, even as the nails were driven into the cross through His hands. We went astray, but God bore our lostness on His shoulders.

We turned our backs on God, and Jesus bore our rebellion in His body. And what makes this so staggering is another thing about sheep and shepherds in the days of Isaiah. He lived in days where animal sacrifices for sin were made in the temple. Sheep were taken to the temple of Jerusalem and slaughtered by the priests, and there they were burnt as offerings to God.

The spotless sheep died to take away the sin of their shepherds. But now in Isaiah 53 verse 6, the dynamic is reversed. The good shepherd dies to take away the sins of the wayward and rebellious sheep.

[19 : 35] He is offered in their place, and His blood sacrificed to God to make atonement for their sin. On the cross, the shepherd dies for the sheep.

Thousands were crucified during the violent days of the Roman Empire. The vast majority were dying as criminals, executed on account of the crimes that they had committed. But Jesus Christ, the good shepherd, was not being crucified for any sin He had committed. He was being offered as the sacrifice for our sin.

The Lamb of God was taking away the sins of the world, as John the Baptist said He would. This is what makes the cross of Jesus the central point in human history. Far more was happening in the crucifixion of Jesus than merely what our eyes could see. Jesus, who knew no sin, was being made a sin offering so that we could become the righteousness of God in Him.

Later, in Galatians chapter 2 verse 20, the apostle Paul spoke of how Jesus is the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me. Again, in Romans chapter 8 verse 32, a wonder struck. Paul writes, He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not along with Him graciously give us all things? Jesus, the good shepherd, the perfect Son of God, upon Him was laid my iniquity, my sin, my guilt, and He became my suffering Savior.

The old man in Canbertslang said of God and the church, Oh, I've had enough of all that stuff in my youth. How poignant it is that God never said that about Him. God has never had enough of us. He gave us His Son. That's how much He loves us.

[21 : 43] My wayward friend pictures her relationship with God as like two people sitting back to back. How powerful it is that God never sits with His back to us, but is always positioned toward us, arms outstretched on the cross to embrace us. See how much the Lord who loves us will never let us go.

I want to make a couple of applications. The first is directed toward anyone here who does not think that they have ever strayed from God. You don't think you have ever strayed from God such that you need a Savior to take away your sin. They've never committed any iniquity such that it needed ever to be forgiven. Isaiah would say to a person like this, did you read what I wrote? All we like sheep have gone astray. Everyone has turned to his own way. Are we really so self-unaware that we think that everyone else in the whole world is included in that little word, all, but we aren't? No one except Jesus has ever perfectly kept the law of God. And so we all have gone astray from Him and need Jesus as our Savior.

The second application is directed toward anybody here who thinks that they have strayed so far away from God that He can't find them. Perhaps there are things in your life of which you are deeply ashamed, and that if others knew about them, they'd be ashamed of you also. When it comes to God, He cannot possibly forgive you for what you've done or the kind of person you've been.

Notice that verse 6 begins and ends with the word all. All, all of us without exception have gone astray. Some have strayed further than others. But in the cross of Jesus, God has gone further than any of us can possibly stray. Forgiveness is within reach of all of us here this morning. Yes, even those who feel they are beyond the pale. That's the good news of the gospel. It is within the reach of a murderer like King David. It is within the reach of an adulterer and a thief. It's within the reach of a religious hypocrite like St. Paul. It is within the reach of the person who is sitting with their back to God. It's within the reach of someone who says, I had enough of all that stuff in my youth. It's within your reach today, whoever you are. Which brings us to the third application. How can we be found by God today? How can we be found by God today? Jesus died with arms outstretched as they nailed His hands to the cross. And His arms invite you to run into His embrace today. We run by trusting in Him to be our

Savior and Lord. You are found even by that faith that what Jesus did there, He did for you. Let nothing stand in your way of being found by God. And then having believed and trusted in Jesus, as time goes on, you'll discover that it was not so much that you found God, but that He found you.

[25 : 09] And that you weren't looking for Him as much as He was looking for you. The cross of Jesus shall become the center, not just of human history, but of your life.

I want to close with a couple of quotes. The first is from 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 24 to 25, where the apostle Peter, contemporary of Paul, reflecting on Isaiah 53, writes of his friend Jesus.

And he says of him, He Himself, He Himself, Jesus Himself, bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wound you have been healed, for you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

The second comes from one of the most famous songs in the English language. It was written by the ex-slaver John Newton, who, reflecting on how God found him on a slavership while he was straying far away, wrote these words, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.