

Behold our Shepherd

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Date: 18 May 2025

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[0 : 00] There are few more endearing images we have of God than that of Him as our shepherd! Perhaps the most famous line of any song in the entire world is the first line of Psalm 23.

! The Lord is my shepherd. One of Jesus' most famous parables is that of the shepherd who, having left the other 99 sheep in safety, searches for that one lost sheep, and when he finds it, lays it across his shoulders and brings it home. Jesus says of Himself, I am the good shepherd who lays down my life for the sheep.

There's something about the image of God as our shepherd which comforts us, and whatever our circumstances makes us feel safe. Now, Isaiah 40 tells the story of how God will rescue His people from their exile in Babylon. Having spiraled downwards through their unfaithfulness to Him, the Israelites were forcibly relocated across the vast Babylonian empire. For 70 years, they were exiled from their homeland because of their unfaithfulness to God. And these were terrifying years of pain and exile. But a time would come when God would lead them out of Babylon and bring them back to Israel, when their sins would be forgiven, and they would once again be established in Jerusalem. And this rescue from Babylon is pictured in Isaiah 40 and verse 11, as that of the Lord, like a shepherd, tending His flock, gathering the lambs in His arms, carrying them in His bosom, and gently leading those who have young. Remember, the returning people of Israel have hundreds of miles to travel from Babylon back to their homeland, but they have the Lord as their shepherd, leading them like a flock of sheep, providing for them, protecting them every step of the way. Although it may be a little fanciful, the homeward journey of the exiles was compared by the church fathers to the lifelong journey of the Christian. Like John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, we leave behind us the city of destruction where we became Christians, and we made our way to the celestial city of heaven.

But we do not travel there alone, unkept or unprotected. Rather, as we make our way through all the years of our lives, the Lord tends to us. He gathers us, He carries us, and He gently leads us to Himself. Now, we will all experience many hardships on this journey. We may be attacked by all kinds of enemies, but the Lord will always be our shepherd, and the Lord will always lead us home.

[3 : 09] Picture this. In all of life's ups and downs, in all of our pleasures, in all of our pains, in all of our joys, in all of our sorrows, the Lord is our tender and powerful shepherd, and He will hold us fast, near to His heart. For a short while this evening, I want to explore this image of the Lord as our shepherd from Isaiah 40 verse 11 under three headings. First, our glorious shepherd. Then, our gracious shepherd. And then, our gentle shepherd. For any of us who may be feeling a little bit lost and alone this evening, take comfort. The Lord is your shepherd. The Lord will never leave you.

He will never forsake you. He will carry you, and He will be with you always. First of all then, our glorious shepherd. Our glorious shepherd. When I was a young child, I would get into a verbal spat with another boy in my class. The argument would always end up with him saying to me, my dad's bigger than your dad. And I'd say to him, no, my dad's bigger than your dad.

Truth be told, his dad and my dad were the same size. In Isaiah 40, however, there's no doubt who's the bigger. One of the reasons we all love Isaiah 40 is because of the picture it paints of the sheer immensity of the Lord who is our shepherd. It begins in verse 9 with this amazing statement, Behold your God. Behold Him indeed, the limitless sovereignty of His kingly reign.

Then from verse 12 begins a series of rhetorical questions. Who has measured the water in the hollows of His hand? Who has measured the spirit of the Lord? Well, the might and power of Babylon can be counted and measured, but the immensity of God is beyond all calculation. Behold, Isaiah cries out, the nations are like drops from a bucket and are accounted as dust on the scales. Drops of water, dust indeed. The greatness of the greatest of human empires is but dust on the scales. On one side of the scales is the weight of God. On another side is a fleck of dust.

[5 : 42] All the nations are as nothing before Him. Who does the puny king of Babylon suppose himself to be composed to the immensity of the glory of the God of heaven and earth?

God cannot be likened to any image. The limitless infinity of His essence and character go beyond anything the limited finite mind of man can imagine or construct. Then come the three great questions of Isaiah 40. Do you not know? Have you not heard? He sits above the circle of the earth and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. He brings princes to nothing and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Lift up your eyes on high and see who created these, the stars. He brings out their host by number. He calls each by name. Astronomers will admit that they haven't even begun to scratch the surface of all there is to know about the stars. But God created them all and called them each by name.

Isaiah crescendos in verse 28. 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.

Here we have the king of Babylon. And he's seated on a throne of earthly glory, sneering at the world around him. But all the time his beauty is like the flower of the field.

He's less than a grain of dust. A grasshopper. A great emptiness of nothing. My dad's bigger than your dad indeed.

[7 : 36] Our shepherd, he is the everlasting God. Our human minds cannot imagine the greatness of his being.

Any human calculation falls short of measuring even the smallest movement of his power. There are no words in any human language sufficient to even begin to describe his immensity.

To describe himself to us, he must use baby talk so we can understand. All the revelations he makes of himself are like a toddler babbling.

But that is what he must do so that we may know him. So who is this shepherd? This Lord who tends his flock and holds his lambs close to his heart?

Who is this shepherd king who gathers his lambs in his arms and gently leads those who have young? He is the everlasting God. The one before whom all the nations of the earth are dropped from a bucket and as grains of dust.

[8 : 45] The God who will rescue his captive people from Babylon and lead them all the way through the wilderness home to Israel. This is who he is in immensity, power and glory.

Such comfort to the fearful people of Israel. Nothing need they fear if God is their shepherd. No hunger, no thirst, no army, no robber, no mountain or desert.

As Julian of Norwich famously said, All shall be well. All shall be well. It all shall be well because of the glory of the God who is our shepherd.

Our enemies may seem greater than us, but there are drops in a bucket compared to God. The deserts of our lives may seem empty and dry, but the God who created them, created water rather, shall fill them with refreshing pools.

He's the Lord, our shepherd, who leads us beside the still waters and makes us lie down in green pastures. The Lord who leads us in paths of righteousness.

[9 : 55] The shepherd who is with us, comforting us with his rod and his staff as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. As they make their way from Babylon to Canaan, God will prepare banqueting tables for the Israelites in the wilderness.

And his goodness and joy will follow them always. Behold our God, Behold our God, cries Isaiah. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather his lambs in his arms.

He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those who have young. If the church fathers, like Origen and Chrysostom and Augustine were right, and the return from exile is a picture of the Christian life, then surely we too can take comfort from the immensity of the Lord who is our shepherd.

Who are these enemies who stand up against us? Oh, they may seem tall and they may seem strong to us, but they haven't seen the glory of the God who stands over them.

What is this physical or mental illness we are enduring? This grief which gnaws at our very bones. Surely our God, who sustains the innumerable stars in their heavenly positions, can sustain us and cause our cup of joy yet to overflow.

[11 : 27] Are there any here this evening who are anxious or fearful? In my Spurgeon's evening reading for the 27th of March, I read some beautiful words.

He wrote, This is the only royal road to comfort. Great thoughts of your sin alone will drive you to despair, but great thoughts of Christ will pilot you into the heaven of His peace.

Great thoughts of Christ will pilot you into the heaven of His peace. Let's not look inwards at our weakness, sin and frailty, but up at the holiness, the glory and the immensity of our shepherd. Then surely we shall be at peace, and all shall be well with us. The Lord is our glorious shepherd. Second, He's our gracious shepherd.

Our gracious shepherd. The people of Israel were to go into exile in Babylon because of their unfaithfulness to God. For hundreds of years prior to the exile, ever since the days of David, they'd been on a downward spiral.

[12 : 44] Oh, they'd worshipped the Lord, but they'd also worshipped other gods, gods made of wood and stone, the sacrifice to these idols. We even read of one of the kings of Judah who sacrificed his children to a pagan god.

So prior to their captivity in Babylon, Israel had become a morally disgusting, socially corrupted, and religiously depraved nation.

God's judgment on them was severe. He caused the Babylonian army to march in and destroy Jerusalem, to carry its people into exile, scattering them to the four winds of the massive Babylonian empire.

However, His judgment upon them was not so much retributive as restorative. He punished them to bring them to their senses.

During those 70 years in exile, the people of Israel realized why all this had happened to them. They recognized that it was their sin which had brought upon them the judgment of God.

[13 : 54] They repented and once again began to seek the Lord. And it's at this point we enter Isaiah 40 where God says, Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand, double for all her sins. The God who had judged them on account of their sin now forgives them and restores them to Himself.

His gracious love and commitment to them means that they shall never cease to be my people and He shall never cease to be your God. He announces His forgiveness.

Her warfare is ended, her iniquity is pardoned. Israel has paid for its sin by being exiled from God, by being cast away from His holy presence in Jerusalem and now God announces His pardon and restoration.

They've paid the price of their sin. They've borne the punishment. They've been exiled. They've been forsaken by God. Now God will bring them back and restore them to Himself once again.

[15 : 10] He shall be their God. They shall be His people. This chapter paints for us a picture not just of the Lord of glory but also the Lord of grace.

The grace of God and the forgiveness of His people and their reconciliation with Him through the payment of the debt of faithfulness they owed Him.

And then we hear our Lord Jesus Christ crying out, I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. And then we hear the apostle Peter saying, He Himself, Jesus, bore our sins in His body on the tree that we might die to sin and live for righteousness.

By His wounds you have been healed for you were straying like sheep but you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. In the new covenant on account of our sin and unfaithfulness our straying from God Jesus, our shepherd was exiled and forsaken by God on the cross.

[16 : 26] Jesus paid the price of our sin and bore the punishment of our unfaithfulness to Him. The Lord who is our shepherd Himself bore the cost of our idolatry our greed and selfishness.

Through faith in the good shepherd the Lord Jesus Christ our iniquity has been pardoned and we have received from the Lord's hand double for all our sin and all because on the cross Jesus paid the price.

Jesus reconciled us to God. This is the grace of the shepherd of Isaiah 40 verse 11. The shepherd who tends his flock because He gave Himself for them.

The shepherd who gathered his flock in His arms outstretched on the cross for them. The shepherd who carries His lambs near to His heart that heart which for three days didn't beat for us because He was dead in the tomb.

The shepherd who gently leads those who have young because He was harshly led for them to Mount Calvary where He was crucified. In the old covenant innocent sheep were sacrificed on behalf of their sinful shepherds.

[17 : 46] In the new covenant our innocent shepherd was sacrificed on behalf of His sinful sheep. But you know that grace of Christ which brought us to God continues throughout our whole lives as Christians to bring us closer to Him.

The story of the Christian life is the story of Christ's continued grace in forgiving our sin in strengthening us with new resolve and giving us the inextinguishable hope of eternal life. The story of our lives as Christians is grace nothing but grace and whole grace. This evening have you failed your shepherd?

Have you strayed again from Him? Not for the first time but again. When you return do not expect the harshness of a judge.

Expect from Him the grace of a shepherd. Are you exhausted in the service or falling over under the burdens you're having to carry? Go to Him.

[18 : 59] He's your shepherd. Ask Him for grace to help you carry them. Are you fearful and despairing of the future? Take your anxieties to Him and pray for the grace that would replace your worry with His peace.

We have a gracious shepherd therefore all shall be well with us. Our glorious shepherd our gracious shepherd. Then finally our gentle shepherd our gentle shepherd.

When I was a little boy perhaps four or five years old when I'd wake up at night with fear in my heart I'd creep into my mum and dad's bed and my dad would put his big arm around me and I'd be able to put my head on his big hairy chest.

I could listen to the beating of his heart and I was then able to go back to sleep. No matter if the sky was falling down no matter if it was a monster under my bed I couldn't have been safer, more at peace and more contented than when my head was on my dad's chest and I was listening to the beat of his heart.

You know nearly 50 years later I can still remember how loved and safe I felt. We could talk about the gentleness of our glorious and gracious shepherd from each of the four clauses in Isaiah 40 11 but it's the third of them which appeals most to me anyway.

[20 : 40] He will carry them in his bosom. In his bosom. Our shepherd king having gathered us in his arms draws us into himself so that we may hear the beating of his heart.

He does for us what my father used to do for me. He puts his arm around us and draws us close. We were very much by ourselves alone and insecure afraid and worried.

The darkness was oppressive the loneliness was complete and there was a monster behind every corner. There seemed no light and no hope. But then he gathered us in his arms those arms of his which are so powerful yet so gentle.

In Sunday school we all learned the chorus. My God is so big so strong and so mighty there's nothing that he cannot do. We do the actions and when it came to the strong and mighty we'd strike the bodybuilder's poses!

Showing off our bicep muscles. I can't get Aidan to do that for you. Well it's true. Our God is so strong and so mighty but those strong arms those mighty arms they're such tender arms as he gently gathers us to himself.

[22 : 02] Such tender arms as he holds us close. The strong arms of our king are the gentle arms of a shepherd. In John 10 Jesus says my sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me.

I give them eternal life they will never perish and no one will snatch them from my hand. Once the strong arms of our shepherd have us no one not even ourselves and our doubts can snatch us from his grasp.

And he holds us so close so close we can hear his heart and every beat of his heart is a beat of love for us.

Every beat an echo. Once we were far away from him lost fearful like a child waking in the dark but now he's gathered us up in his arms and he's holding us close to himself and he lets us hear the beat of his love.

When I was a child I could not have felt safer more at peace and more contented than when my dad's arms were round me and my head was in his chest.

[23 : 19] Sky could be falling down but I wouldn't care but dad would keep me safe. When our glorious gracious and gentle shepherd has gathered us up in his arms and is holding us close to his heart we can feel so safe.

So much at peace so contented. When I fear my faith may fail Christ will hold me fast. When the tempter would prevail he will hold me fast. I could never keep my hold through life's fearful path for my love is often cold he must hold me fast.

Yes, he holds us fast such beautiful words but where he holds us fast is close to his heart. His arms are so strong and his heart beats with love for us so powerfully but his grip on us is so gentle and so tender.

many of Glasgow's professional rugby team the Glasgow Warriors train at my local gym. Now these rugby players if you've seen them are absolute monsters.

[24 : 34] Well over six feet tall and they've got muscles in places I don't have places but sometimes you'll see them in the swimming pool with a young child one of their own children.

they might be muscly giants but they hold their toddlers in the pool with such strength and yet such tenderness.

Even though it can't swim that young child is never as safe as when it's giant of a father is holding it close. never are we safer than when you have our glorious and gracious shepherd holding us close to his heart.

We might feel that we're drowning in life's sorrows but he's carrying us. We might be confused and full of questions but he's holding us. We might be exhausted and depressed but he draws us close. We might be physically dying but he lets us hear the beat of his gentle heart. Well, to apply this great truth about the Lord being our glorious gracious and gentle shepherd let me suggest that though his hold on us is ultimate we would do well to do everything we can to hold on to him.

[25 : 58] We need to walk closely with him listening to the voice of our shepherd through our reading of his word. We need to let our voices be heard by him as we pray.

We need to be daily strengthened by the grace of the spirit as we abide in him. And we need to take every advantage of the Lord's supper!

Where the good shepherd says to us I will feed you with myself and my grace. There may be some here for whom the Lord is not your shepherd yet.

You're still lost in the darkness you're still straying in the desert you're still dying on the inside. The good shepherd Jesus Christ extended wide his arms on the cross as if to embrace a sinful world and invites us today to enter into his embrace the shepherd who died for his sheep.

He invites us to believe and trust in him to let him tend us and gather us up in his gentle arms.

[27 : 11] So my final question is this will you this evening let him draw you close so close that you may hear the loving beat of the loving heart of our loving shepherd.