

His Head, Our Sin

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[0 : 0 0] And turn with me for a short while this evening to Isaiah chapter 53 and verse 6. Isaiah 53 and verse 6.

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.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule. Your spirit our teacher. And your greater glory.

Our supreme concern through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. I don't know why it is, but it's of Scotland more than any other country in the world.

Christians think of when they hear of sheep and shepherds. One might have expected that rather than our national anthem being O Flower of Scotland, it should have been entitled O Shepherds of Scotland.

[1 : 0 6] It's therefore natural that as Scots we identify most readily with the language of Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd. Or that of John 10 where Jesus says I am the good shepherd.

Other Christians having me brought up in a different context from our own, more readily identify with other imagery. For example, one of Phil Stogner's closest friends is a man called David Swain.

When I was over in the States a few years ago, Phil took me to David's house and David kindly took me on a tour of his vineyard. So for David Swain and for many other Christians like him, they more readily identify with the imagery of vines and vineyards.

Think of Jesus' self-designation in John 15. I am the true vine. Jesus' parables about new wine. But by virtue of our climate and our landscape in Scotland, while we have very few vines, we have very many sheep.

And so as I say, we readily identify with the imagery of sheep and shepherds. And yet for all that, I wonder why it is that Isaiah 53 verse 6 features less prominently than other passages in Scripture which speak of sheep and shepherds.

[2 : 3 0] And then we realize something. That though we in Scotland have our own heritage, we share one thing in common with every other human being on planet Earth.

We don't like to be told that we're sinners who when left to our own devices stray far and wide. We don't like to be told that we need a saviour to pay for the penalty of our iniquities.

Maybe that's why. Because one and all, Scots or Americans, we're all dead in our transgressions and sins, and we don't like to be reminded of it.

That's why we'd far prefer to sing Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd, than to read Isaiah 53 verse 6, All we like sheep have gone astray.

Each of us have turned to his own way. But you know, this verse, far from being bad news, is the best of all news. Because the straying sheep have a shepherd's sacrifice.

[3 : 37] Listen carefully to this. Whereas in the old covenant, the blameless sheep were sacrificed on account of the sins of their straying shepherds, In the new covenant, the covenant under which we live, the blameless shepherd, Jesus Christ, is sacrificed on account of the sins of his straying sheep.

You know, if that doesn't fill your heart with humility, and with praise, I fear you may still be a stray sheep, with the weight of your own iniquities remaining on your own head.

So then this evening, with a view to being brought down in humility, but also lifted high in praise, let's consider the two elements of this marvelous verse. Straying sheep, shepherd's sacrifice.

Straying sheep, shepherd's sacrifice. Always remembering that whereas in the old covenant, the blameless sheep were sacrificed on account of the sins of their straying shepherds, in the new covenant, the covenant under which you and I live, the blameless shepherd, Jesus Christ, is sacrificed on account of his straying sheep.

So first of all then, straying sheep, straying sheep. Isaiah begins, all we like sheep have gone astray.

[5 : 14] We have turned everyone to his own way. In Ephesians chapter 2, Paul uses a different image. You were dead in your transgressions and sins.

In John 3, Jesus uses a different image again. The people love darkness rather than light because their works were evil. I think we get the picture.

This is who we are by nature. Dead, dark, and astray. As you look out over human history, even the most optimistic of us have to admit that Isaiah is not far off the mark.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Every one of us have turned to our own way. Very briefly, I want to consider the two elements of who and what we are as straying sheep.

First of all, straying explained. Straying explained. The word which Isaiah uses and we translate as astray can be used in different contexts and is used in different contexts in the Bible.

[6 : 24] So for example, in Exodus 23, verse 4, it's used to describe an ox which has wandered off from its owner. It's gone walkabout. It doesn't know where it's going.

It's just wandering. Again, in Isaiah 28, in verse 7, it's used to describe the way in which a drunk man staggers. He takes a step to the right.

He takes a step forward. He takes two steps to the left. He falls down. He gets up again and the whole process begins once more. He doesn't know what he's saying, what he's going, or what he's doing.

He is befuddled with drink. But then in Ezekiel 44, verse 10, the word we translate here as astray is used in the context of religious backsliding.

Religious backsliding. In that verse, we read these words, the Levites who went far from me, going astray from me after idols when Israel went astray.

[7 : 29] So in that context, straying is defined in terms of idolatry and unfaithfulness to God, of turning away from God after strange foreign religions.

But in this verse, Isaiah is even more pointed. He says, all we like sheep have gone astray, but defines that in his second clause by saying, we have turned everyone to his own way.

This is what it means to go walk about, to stagger like a drunk man, to go astray. In the words of the famous song, it is to do life my way.

Sheep left to do things my way often get themselves into horrendous situations. So they see a tuft of grass on the other side of the fence and they try to wiggle their heads through the barbed wire.

They fall off the edge of cliffs, fall into mud pits, their lambs are taken by eagles. If sheep really were that resourceful, they wouldn't need shepherds at all.

[8 : 39] By definition, sheep are sheep. The fact that there were such things as shepherds in Scotland demonstrates that sheep are really not self-sufficient, but need help at every turn.

And yet, Isaiah's verdict on humanity is that all of us are like sheep without a shepherd. Sheep who are going astray, going and walk about, staggering like drunk men.

Twice in the book of Judges, both in Judges 17, 6 and 21, 5, we read these words. In those days there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Israel with no king, the sheep with no shepherd, everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

This is one of the best descriptions of the moral, ethical, and religious anarchy which describes our nation today. Everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes.

[9 : 44] You could call it anarchy, chaos, free-for-all, but there is no ultimate principle which is guiding men's actions today. Everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes.

Just like sheep going astray, just like a drunk man staggering in the darkness, like a blind man on walkabout. I heard an old elder from another free church in Glasgow say it like this.

He said, stop a man in the street and tell him a lie and he will believe it. Stop a man in the street and tell him the truth and he will laugh you out of town.

Moral, ethical, and religious standards have been relativized to the extent that there is no absolute right and no absolute wrong. The consciences of our people are so terribly seared that they can no longer tell the difference between truth and lie.

But it's not so much an offense against this abstract quality we call truth which defines what it means for us to stray.

[10 : 54] Not even that we have all turned to our own ways. Rather, it's the word that Isaiah uses. We have turned. We have turned.

The sheep have turned from their shepherd. The people have strayed from their king. We have turned away from God. You see, our straying is first and foremost a personal sin committed against a personal God.

He has a way for us, a way which leads to love, to life, and to peace. But we have turned away each of us trying to find our own imaginary versions of love, peace, and life in our own imaginary ways.

but all the time it is not so much what we have turned to which defines us as straying sheep but who we have turned away from our loving and gracious God.

It says in Scripture in another place we will not have this man to rule over us. We will not be guided by him. We will not be protected by him.

[12 : 09] We will not be loved by him. We will go our own way which by the way has never once ended well. We'd rather go our own way than go his.

We will not live under his authority. We will reach forth and take the forbidden fruit just as Adam and Eve did. And when our loving God asks us what is this you have done we must answer I like a sheep have gone astray I have turned to my own way.

Straying explained turning from God. Straying extended secondly Straying extended albeit of course we can point to obvious examples in our society today where someone has gone off the rails surely Isaiah's verdict is too harsh but is he wrong?

Really? Is he wrong? Listen again to what he says all we like sheep all of us that are no exceptions to that word all there is no I in all it is wholly universal that by nature every human being has turned away from God and is walking in his own way.

from the greatest to the least from the most moral to the least moral from the richest to the poorest all of us whoever we are have gone off the rails all we are like sheep who have gone astray each of us have turned to our own ways.

[13 : 45] How unpleasant Isaiah's verdict which is perhaps why Isaiah 53 verse 6 is not as popular in Scotland as Psalm 23 is.

The psalmist followed by Paul repeats the verdict there is no one righteous no not even one for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

All of us whoever we are wherever we're from we have sinned and we have fallen short of God's supreme glory.

All of us have committed to borrow a word from the second part of verse 6 here iniquities that's the extent of our straying as a human race that when you walk down a busy Buchanan street on a Saturday afternoon every face you see hides a heart which has turned from God when you turn on your television and you see the great and the good they are all of them everyone staggering like drunk men like sheep poking their head through a barbed wire fence no exceptions but just in case we find Isaiah is all just too much for us he brings it back down to earth and he drives it home to each of us he says we have turned everyone to his own way perhaps even better translated we have turned each man to his own way yes listen to that again each has turned to his own way that means me and that means you not some indefinable stereotype of what a human being is but us as individuals not just that person sitting next to you in your pew but you it is as if

Isaiah is bringing us to this point as I said before where we are so humbled before God that we must confess yes I'm that sheep which has strayed from you yes I have turned away from you and I'm now going my own way no nation likes to celebrate its failures which is why we have flower of Scotland as our national anthem and not sheep of Scotland but this is who we are we are not the proud nation who sent proud Edward's army back to think again we are a people and a nation who are like sheep which have gone astray a nation which is turning its back on God and going its own way the barbed wire cuts round our necks and we are sinking into the mud but still we will go our own way like a blind man on walk about like a drunk man staggering turning away religiously morally and ethically from the

[16 : 43] God who made our nation so great in the first place the God whose love for us is infinite eternal and unchangeable and whose ways for us are life love and peace humility you see this is where this takes us humility before God straying sheep but second shepherd sacrifice shepherd sacrifice let's let's go back to the original theme of this text namely that whereas in the old covenant in the old testament the blameless sheep were sacrificed on account of the sins of their straying shepherds in the new covenant that covenant under which we live the blameless shepherd Jesus Christ is sacrificed on account of his straying sinful sheep and this is the good news of the gospel the good shepherd has given himself for his straying sheep the

Lord who is my shepherd has given himself on the cross to take away all our sins and all our iniquities that's why Isaiah writes and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all let's consider this shepherd sacrifice under two brief headings he was commissioned by God and he was condemned by God he was commissioned by God first of all a shepherd commissioned by God you will know that from the very beginning of the Bible atonement for sin was made by a person offering up an animal as a sacrifice so Abel brought an animal as did Noah as did all the other patriarchs the whole old covenant is dominated by the sacrificial system hundreds of thousands of sheep and bulls and goats and birds sacrificed to make atonement for the sins of the people this is the way

God ordained it to be in the old covenant the way he commanded that sin be atoned for it is interesting to note the particular way in which God commanded the sacrifice to be made the person who was making the offering would place his hand on the head of the animal thus signifying the transfer of his sins to the animal so this unblemished sheep this perfect goat this powerful yearling bull became that man's sin bearer by virtue of that man laying his hand on its head that action of laying your hand on the head transferred your sin to that animal you will also know that the shepherds of Israel picked the most perfect of their animals for offerings and they would take them to the temple and lay their hand on that animal and by virtue of the offering his sins were taken away this was the way

God ordained it to be in the old covenant the perfect sheep paid the price for the sinful shepherd he laid his hand on that sheep's head and all his iniquities passed into the body of that sheep and that sheep was then slaughtered those sheep were born to die for their shepherds the sins of their shepherds laid to their account but now here in Isaiah 53 verse 6 we read and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all in the same way that God commanded in the old covenant that the sins of the shepherds should be laid on their sheep in the new covenant God commanded that the sins of the sheep should be laid on their shepherd so what happened to Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep was not an accident his sufferings and death were no unfortunate incidences rather we read the

Lord laid the iniquity of us all upon him because this is God's ultimate solution to the problem of our straying sinful hearts that he should lay our iniquities upon our shepherd no longer shall we do what is right in our own eyes rather God does what is right in his eyes rather than turn away from us as we turn away from him God turns toward his sheep and turns away his face from the shepherd he lays his iniquities onto the shepherd's head it's been said of Isaiah chapter 53 you know that it so accurately portrays the sufferings of Christ that it was as if Isaiah was writing it from the very foot of the cross on which Jesus died to borrow the imagery from

[22 : 21] Genesis 22 and Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac we'll look at that in a few weeks time on a Sunday morning it was God who led his son to the hill called Golgotha and sacrificed him there for us the God we had offended against and turned away from the God against whom we had rebelled and committed iniquity the God we had hated and strayed from it was this God who commissioned the good shepherd to die for his sheep in love the God whom we did not love loved us by giving up his son for us on the cross a shepherd commissioned by God a shepherd condemned for our iniquity second a shepherd condemned for our iniquity as we close I want to examine just very briefly what it was

God gave his son unto we read here and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all in the old covenant a sinful shepherd would lay all his sins onto his sheep and that sheep would then be sacrificed the sheep would pay the price of the shepherd's sin the sheep would take the blame the sheep would bear the penalty of death but according to Isaiah the Isaiah who could just as easily have been writing these words from the foot of the cross the son of God the suffering servant the good shepherd was being sacrificed to pay the price of the iniquities of his sheep he's taking their blame he's paying the penalty of death for them under the old covenant the sheep were condemned for the iniquity of their shepherds but in the new covenant

God's son the great and good shepherd Jesus Christ was condemned for the iniquity of his sheep or to put it a bit earlier to put it a bit like we did a bit earlier whereas in the old covenant the blameless sheep were sacrificed on account of the sins of their straying shepherds in the new covenant that covenant under which you and I live the blameless shepherd Jesus Christ is sacrificed on account of the sins of his straying sheep the good shepherd sacrificed for the bad sheep the perfect shepherd sacrificed for his blemished sheep Jesus died for us all that slaughter which we associate with the old testament sacrifice of animals it was all meted out on

Jesus as he hung upon the cross our shepherd sacrifice Golgotha was a fearful place as the deaths of a million animals climaxed in the death of the shepherd of the shepherd of the shepherd of the shepherd of the Lord my God my God why have you forsaken me at that very moment during those three hours of darkness before he finally died God was laying our sins upon the shoulders of our shepherd and he was bearing the punishment we deserved even as we had turned away from him he turned toward us extending his arms and welcoming his sheep back into his fold whoever you have been whoever you are now whatever you have done whatever you are doing now the

Lord has laid on the good shepherd the iniquity of us all bad news is that we are more lost and more iniquitous than we think we are the good news is that we are more loved and more atoned for than we imagine we are our shepherd died for us he put his head through the barbed wire fence in our place he sank into that mud pit for us he searched for us when we had gone our own way and he died to bring us back to him and now having been found by Christ let's resolve that by his grace we will devote ourselves to following him wherever he should lead us we will follow him into deeper holiness into wider love into higher sacrifice we aren't really sheep we're just like them in some ways but Jesus remains our good shepherd to whom we look for protection comfort guidance life grace peace and hope if it is the imagery of sheep and shepherds with which we as Scots most readily identify let's ensure we make the most of it let's ensure that as

[27 : 51] Scottish Christians we are known for how like sheep we joyfully rest in our good shepherd's love for us his care for us and his grace toward us let us pray by to Ihre be ■