

The Strong and Gentle Shepherd

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn again to Isaiah chapter 40, and the chapter we read, Isaiah chapter 40, I'm reading at verse 11, Isaiah 40 verse 11, 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.

As we know, the prophecy of Isaiah is an absolutely magnificent prophecy, language, we've often said that before, is the finest that you find in the Hebrew language.

Isaiah's prophecy covers, throughout his actual prophesying, he prophesies during the time of the, while the Jews are still living in Jerusalem, while there's the threat of Assyrian invasion, but his prophecies cover the captivity of the Jews where they've been taken away, and the destruction of the temple, and the destruction of Jerusalem, but his prophecies go further than that, they cover the time when the exile is over, and the Jews are restored back to Jerusalem.

But it covers even further than that, because interlaced all the way through the prophecy, there are so many references to the coming, and to the life, and to the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So Isaiah's prophecies cover a huge time area. And it's in this prophecy, in chapter 40, that we find there's kind of a new section opens in the prophecies.

[2 : 0 0] And he begins by highlighting that there are different voices speaking. There are, you'll notice that in this first part of the chapter, that it begins with comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Then in verse 3, it tells us, a voice cries. And then in verse 6, again, it says, a voice says cry. And then in verse 9, it says, about getting up on a high mountain and lift up your voice, herald good news.

So there are different voices speaking at the beginning of the chapter. And the first voice is speaking to a broken people.

These are the people who are in captivity. Because sometimes the prophecies, they moved, they were, the prophecies were for just a little time ahead, but other times they were for a long time ahead.

And sometimes they moved backwards and forwards like that. But this is speaking to those who are in captivity, and those who have been, have suffered terribly.

[3 : 0 7] Those who are in a strange land with broken hearts, remembering better days. They saw the temple broken down.

They saw the walls of Jerusalem broken down. And they themselves are kind of broken. But the Lord has come to them. And his words are words of restoration. Comfort, comfort my people, is what the Lord is saying.

And it's really lovely language. Because the Lord is speaking, as it were, it's almost like a heart to heart.

This is tender speaking. It's the voice of, like, from one heart to another. And that's what the Lord does to his people. Even though sometimes our sin can bring his chastisement down upon us, he is always in the business of restoring us.

My soul, he doth restore again. That's what the Lord does to us. He restores his people. And this is what he's going to come to do to Jerusalem, and come to do to the Jews, I should say, who are in captivity.

[4 : 17] He is going to restore them. And as we know, the walls were rebuilt. The temple was rebuilt. And the Jews were able to return. And that's always the, God's people never, ever stop being God's people.

And the Lord won't let you wander too far away. Even if you do, he comes after you in order to take you back. He might let you go for a while. But always, he will take you back.

And so this is what we're told of here. And so there is this great message of pardon and forgiveness. And then the second voice really is a voice of renewed hope.

Because here's going to be a desert going to be built in the highway. All the valleys shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low. It's like here's the Lord preparing for the return.

And the Lord, before the Lord comes to work, often there's a time of preparation. Before Jesus came into his public ministry, there was John the Baptist's ministry.

[5 : 25] It was a preparation ministry. And in fact, when you read verse 3, A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Straight away you think of John the Baptist, who was preparing the way for Jesus.

And here we have the Lord's preparation, making the way, opening up for the restoration of his people. And then we find in verse 6, there's another voice, a third voice.

And this is really the voice of God's promise. A voice says, cry. And I said, what shall I cry? It says, all flesh is grass, and all its beauty like the flower of the field.

And the Lord is saying, the grass withers, the flower feeds. But my word will never fade. And what the Lord is actually doing to his people there is saying, right, I want you to think upon these great nations.

Think of the Assyrian Empire. Think of the Babylonian Empire. Think of these kings and mighty warriors that you were so afraid of, who caused havoc amongst you.

[6 : 34] Where are they? They're gone. Just like the grass. Oh, they flourished up for a wee while, like the flower it blooms. But it's gone. But he said, there's only one thing that endures.

I endure. And my word endures. My word of promise endures. And that's a great comfort to you, to me today. Because sometimes we feel threatened. And we feel that there are powers that are beyond us.

And we look at all the enemies against the cause of Christ. And we think, what's going to happen to the church? What's going to happen to me? And the Lord says, they're only going to be there for a wee while.

Or they might bloom and flourish for a little. But like the grass, they'll soon be cut down. But my word of promise will always be there. I've never changed. Before I gave my word of promise, I knew the very end.

I knew the end from the beginning. Nothing is going to take me by surprise. And so the Lord is reassuring his people. I'm in control. All these enemies are turning to dust.

[7 : 44] But my word and my purpose will continue forever. And that's really what the Lord is saying there. And so it's one of the great encouragements that we find there.

And so he's really saying that the Jews are not to worry. And then the last voice is this voice of, get you up to a high mountain.

O Zion, herald of good news, lift up your voice with strength. Say to the cities of Judah, behold your God.

You know, this is the great news. The great news in the whole world. And this is the message that all this world must hear.

And you know, I was just thinking about this. The most awful thing that a person can do is to try and deny other people the right to hear the greatest news in the whole wide world.

[8 : 46] Every person who is determined to destroy the Christian faith is an enemy of your soul, hates your soul.

That's the bottom line. And you know, it's a fearful thought. They don't want anybody to hear the greatest news in the whole wide world.

And the great news is God's love to us in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. And there are people giving all their God-given gifts and abilities today in trying to eradicate the Christian faith from public life in Britain.

Do you know this? It's awful. These people are the absolute enemies of your soul. They might not have analyzed it, but actually they hate your soul. Every one of them hates your soul.

Now that's a solemn thought, but that's what it is. And may God bring them to see what they're actually doing. Because that's the bottom line. It's a hatred of a person's soul.

[9 : 54] They hate their own souls, obviously. They don't value their own soul, and they don't value anybody else's. And that's why God says, get up to the highest point.

In other words, herald this news. Everywhere. Behold your God. It's the most important thing that can be done in the whole wide world is to proclaim and to show who God is.

And as you go through this chapter, and many of the other chapters from Isaiah, Isaiah, it shows us something of the majesty and the glory and the authority and the dominion and the rule of God.

And so, it's important for us always to focus upon these things. And Isaiah then, he goes on to talk about God. Behold, the Lord comes with might, and his arm rules for him.

Now, again, we just sang that in Psalm 89. Thou hast an arm that's full of power. Thy hand is great in might. We often find that the Bible talks about God as if he had bodily parts.

[11 : 02] He doesn't. Of course, the second person of the Godhead, in coming in our nature, Jesus Christ has bodily parts. But God as a spirit does not have bodily parts.

But the reason that he uses that language is for us to understand. Otherwise, we couldn't. Because when it talks about God having an ear, it is to help us to understand that he hears our cry, hears our prayer.

When it talks about God seeing, it is, of course, when it talks about the eye of God, it, of course, enables us to understand what it is to see and such like.

But it talks here about God's arm. And we know that this arm of the Lord is a powerful arm. There's no greater arm of power or might anywhere ever than the arm of the Lord.

Great in might. Powerful. And the Bible is full of examples of that. And so often we find that the Lord's hand or his arm is outstretched towards his people.

[12 : 13] But the solemn and sad time is when the Lord's arm is shortened. We have an example of that in Isaiah. In chapter 59, where the question is, is the Lord's arm shortened that he cannot save?

Or is ear heavy? In other words, death that he cannot hear. No, that's not what's happened. The problem is that your iniquities have separated between you and your God.

You see, our sin has an impact upon God. God cannot just remain oblivious to our sin. He cannot pretend it doesn't exist.

Our sin affects God. And so that's what had happened to the Jews. Because of their sin, it was as if his arm was no longer outstretched to help them.

It was as if his arm had shortened. And that's an awful place to be where God's arm is no longer out for you. It's the most wonderful thing to know that the hand of God is there to help you, to provide for you, to give to you.

[13 : 26] And so we have this great arm, the arm of the Lord. And as we recognize that sin can affect, as we said, the Lord's dealings with us.

And that's why we have to confess our sin. That's why we must own up to and deal with sin. But then we see that God's arm here is shown in a different way.

It moves from being an arm of power and might to being an arm that is tender and caring and loving. And this is the same Lord.

The same Lord who is great in might is also the Lord of gentleness, the Lord of love, the Lord of care, the Lord who watches over our every move.

And you can't read this without our minds going to John chapter 10, to the good shepherd. Because in a sense, this is the Old Testament version of what Jesus does.

[14 : 30] 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. And that's what a flock of sheep is, a church.

The church of God is the flock of sheep. Not everybody in the world belongs to that flock. It is only those who have the shepherd as their shepherd.

It's a question you have to ask yourself today. Is Jesus my shepherd? And we enter into that fold, into the flock, into the fold with the flock, by the call of the shepherd.

It's the shepherd who called us. And you know his voice. Jesus tells us that in the good shepherd narrative. He says, My sheep hear my voice.

My sheep know the voice of the shepherd. So today, if you're a believer, you know the voice of the shepherd.

[15 : 31] And that voice is important to you. It's a voice that first called you. And you're still in that fold. And you will always be in that fold. And may I say to you today, if you're not in the fold, it's time to get in.

You see, you could, a person could spend their life living beside the flock, living, doing things with the flock.

In other words, you could come to church all your life. You could sit beside Christians all your life. You could even share the same Bible every Lord's Day and still be outside the fold, not part of the flock.

And that's an incredibly sad and serious thing, to be so near and yet so far. Because outside is not in.

And that's so important for us to grasp and to lay hold upon, that we have to get inside. And so Jesus shows here of his great love for the flock.

[16 : 46] And those who belong to him will follow him. And then we see, when we look at the flock, we always remember this, he will tend his flock like a shepherd.

Now, in the Middle East, if you had gone there, you would see maybe a hillside, and it would be full of sheep and full of goats. Sometimes the sheep and the goats, they graze together. The shepherd would come and he would separate the sheep from the goats.

Jesus, of course, talks about doing that at the end of the day. People who've lived together and shared together and appeared to be so like one another. But they're not the same.

There's a difference. And Jesus knows every one that is his. And there will come a great day of separation, a solemn day of separation. And when Jesus talked about separating the sheep from the goats, the people in the Middle East at that time understood exactly the picture that he was painting.

But Jesus is talking here about his sheep. And we know that they are so defenseless. It's one thing about a sheep. You see a dog jump a fence and go in amongst a flock of sheep.

[17 : 55] The sheep just, they go crazy. They just, fear takes over and they go on this stampede and you see them, they run and they turn and they look and then they're away and there's just, there's this terror that takes over.

They're so defenseless. And you know, to a certain extent the Church of Jesus Christ appears so defenseless in this world. We don't, we don't have a call to arms physically.

We're not called to fight. The Church is full of people who were once fighters. But they're not anymore because grace has transformed them and changed them.

Violence would sometimes were part and partial of people who are now Christians. It was maybe every weekend they love to fight. But they've laid down their fists because of the power of love.

You see, grace changes. And the Church is full of people who might be strong as lions, bold in the face of many dangers and yet there is, they're defenseless because this is the way of it.

[19 : 07] Our dependence is upon Jesus Christ. Our love to Him and our hope is always in Him. So the Church is always vulnerable. And that's why you find, because so often you look around and you say to yourself, the day we're living in, it's almost like every other religion is protected apart from Christianity.

Christianity seems to be the one that always gets battered. Christianity is the one that people always seem to poke fun and ridicule and try and destroy. But that's because we're a defenseless.

That is because we belong to Jesus Christ. And the world hates Christ and the world hates everything that belongs to Christ. And so, it is, as you can see, being part of the flock puts you at a human perspective in a kind of weak position.

But we're not weak because like the apostle we've discovered that there is a strength given to us in Jesus Christ. And that's why he said, you know, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Paul was a violent, vicious man before he became a Christian. He remained strong and robust, but his strength was all now in the Lord.

[20 : 27] And so, it tells us here he will tend his flock. That means that he will feed, he will look after, he will shepherd. And that's what he's doing right now. He's tending the flock.

Because when we come to church and we open the word and we sing it, we read it, and then think upon it as we're doing just now, this is what we term means of grace.

It's a means where God's grace works within our heart and where we're being fed, we're being nourished, we're being strengthened. And the Lord knows exactly today what you need.

Maybe you came in here today and because of the circumstances of the week, there might be a lot of pain in your heart. The Lord knows exactly what you need.

Maybe it's as we sang 147 there about how the Lord binds up the broken hearted. And maybe as we sang that you say, Oh Lord, I need that, please do that for me.

- [21 : 29] Well, that's the way he tends the flock. Maybe we needed a rebuke. Maybe there was something that we were needing need sorted in our lives and the Lord will do that.
- He will open our minds by the Spirit so that we're challenged in some way. Maybe we're needing direction in a particular way to go, a choice that has to be made.
- We're not sure about something and again, under the Word, the Lord will feed us. He will lead us. He will tend to us. And it's beautiful the way that the Lord knows exactly what you need and what I need.
- And so that's why it's essential to be under the Word every single day, not just public as we are just now, but private. everybody needs.
- You know this, we will never grow as Christians if we never open our Bibles. The more we are in the Word, the more the Word will work in us.
- [22 : 32] It's just, it has a cleansing effect. It has an impact upon you. Although you might read the Word and you might say, you know, I didn't get an awful lot from it today.
- It's still done you good. It's just the same way as we eat. We don't always reflect on what we eat, but we need it for nourishment. And so it is spiritually.
- We need the nourishment. And so the Lord will feed us. He will tend to us. It's a lovely Word. He will tend. He will look after. And you know this, He's mapped out your life.
- He's tending to you all the time. And even in things that have really, from all things that seem to have gone completely wrong in your life, He's still tending to you.
- And then we see that He will gather the lambs. This is what He says. He will tend His flock like a shepherd and He will gather the lambs in His arms and He will carry them in His bosom.
- [23 : 32] And it's a beautiful picture here of tenderness. Because here's the shepherd. Very often a shepherd is a dog. And he works, the dog works the sheep. There's no sign of a dog here.
- It's just the shepherd almost like in a one-to-one with the lambs. Who are the lambs? Well, the lambs most certainly are the young Christians, people who've come to faith. But they could also be the children within the church.
- And the Lord tends to, He carries them. And we need to always be careful. Take that image of how the Lord deals with the young. It's so gentle.
- It's so tender. It's so caring. And we need to be always careful that we don't knock our young. Knock our young children or that we knock our young converts, those who are young in the faith.
- Because, you know, you tend to remember, particularly those who've just come to faith, you will always remember the early days. There's lots of stuff you won't remember along the way. But you will remember the early days.
- [24 : 35] And you'll remember those who encouraged you and helped you. And you might also, and you will also remember those who maybe knocked you. These things stick with you. You might, as I say, you might forget lots of other things along the journey.
- But the early days, you remember. You remember the people who were around you, the people who were there with you and for you. And so it's important that there is this sense of caring, sense of love, sense of shepherding.
- And He will carry them in His bosom. That is close to Himself, close to His heart. It's like He's got a special place for the lambs, for those, and He will gently lead those that are with young.
- You know, the Lord never stops leading. That's what He's going to do right throughout His life. He never, ever stops leading us. And He, not only in this world, but it's part of what will take place in glory.

That He will lead us. We're told that. It's an ongoing work. The moment Jesus becomes your shepherd, and He begins to lead you, and you begin to follow Him, throughout an endless eternity, an endless eternity, isn't that a thought?

[25 : 57] You will never, ever stop following Him. If you're outside the fold, do not spend an endless eternity outside it.

Don't die outside it. You know, as I said, yesterday we went to Dalmore for a couple of times, and I remember I was picked up this handful of sand, and I was looking at it, and I was just saying, there are millions and billions and billions of grains of sand.

And she was saying, I remember a sermon Reverend John McLean preached, and he was describing eternity in this way. Imagine if a bird came, and once a year took a grain of sand, and flew off.

And then the next year came, and took another grain of sand. And this bird has to empty the beach of every grain of sand. Can you imagine how long that would take?

Well, that doesn't even come close to the length of an eternity. What a thought that is. So are we going to be in the fold, or outside the fold, forever?

[27 : 10] It's a solemn thought.