

Sheep need a Shepherd - Rev. Donald Morrison (Retired)

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back for a while to the passage of Scripture we read in Isaiah chapter 53.!

Sheep need a shepherd. That's a statement I don't really need to elaborate here on the island of Lewis where there are many sheep, although there's a lot fewer sheep around today than there were, say, 10, 20, 30 years ago.

In many parts of the world, sheep are often pastured in remote mountain regions far away from centers of population. If you climb high up into the Pyrenees or into the Alps or any mountain region throughout the world, you will hear the bells that are attached to the collars of sheep and of cattle. And in every mountain region from the Alps to the Urals to the Rockies, you will find sheep. My late uncle Alistair, he emigrated to the United States back in the 1930s, and for many years he was a shepherd in the hills of Wyoming.

He was looking after sheep. He was on the alert for wolves and pumas with his rifle because against these predators, the sheep themselves had no defense.

[1 : 40] If you go up into the Pyrenees, which is an area that I visited on a number of occasions when I was younger and fitter, there are lush green valleys high up in the mountains.

And in late September, before the first snows come, the shepherds, they bring the sheep down to the lowland pastures in the valley. If left to their own devices, the sheep would continue to graze happily high up in the mountains, and then it would snow and they would be trapped, and many would die from the cold.

And here in Lewis, with the rocky crags that we're so familiar with in different parts of the island, I've seen sheep trapped on cliff ledges, enticed there by the green grass.

And you often look at that cliff and you wonder, how on earth did the sheep manage to get down to that ledge? But they're totally unable to extricate themselves.

And I've often seen sheep lying dead at the foot of crags or in bogs. Left to themselves, sheep will wander and go astray without thinking of the consequences.

[2 : 48] And it's a good picture of wayward humanity. Not for nothing does the Bible describe us as sheep. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, and each of us has turned to his own way.

Isaiah looked with great sadness at the plight of his people, at the waywardness of his fellow Israelites, the Lord's covenant people, the Lord's people whom he had redeemed and freed from slavery in Egypt and had settled them in a land flowing with milk and honey, who had given them absolutely everything that he could, lavishing his love upon them.

And yet Isaiah looked sadly at the waywardness of his people, who so often turned their backs upon the Lord. The sheep of his pasture is how the Bible describes the Lord's people.

But it was nothing new in Isaiah's day. You could go right back to the very beginning of Scripture, and we will see that Israel had always been like that. During the 40 years in the wilderness, so often they murmured, so often they moaned, so often they looked back and they grumbled.

And then when Moses was away on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, they were enticed onto dangerous ground and engaged in idolatry and suffered as a result.

[4 : 17] And at the end of the Book of Judges, we read there, in those days Israel had no king. Everyone did as he saw fit. So mankind's tendency to wander away from the Lord and turn its back on the shepherd is seen throughout the Bible right the way from the beginning to the end.

From Adam and Eve's disobedience, who thought that they knew better than the Lord, who listened to Satan rather than heeding the commands of the Lord.

One command only that he gave them. And then in chapter 4 of Genesis, we think of the defiance of this man, Lamech. He didn't want anyone to tell him what to do.

And then to the generation of Noor, and we read in chapter 6 of Genesis, the Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, that every inclination, not just some, but every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.

The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. And then when we jump forward hundreds, thousands of years, when the good shepherd did eventually come into this wild, they put him to death, referring to release a criminal rather than the author of life.

[5 : 41] And today is no different, because those words at the end of Judges, that there was no king in Israel in those days, and every man did what was right in his own eyes.

You could apply that also to a Western civilization. Everything goes, and anything goes, that is opposed to the will of God.

We are scorned for believing in creation. We're visited by the police if we should criticize certain lifestyles. We're vilified as narrow-minded, for claiming that Christ is the only way to heaven. And if we choose another way, then we know that that will not take us to heaven. But we are vilified for believing that. We're narrow-minded, and we're accused of denying women their rights, because we oppose abortion.

The pastures of the Lord have not been green enough, and so we seek something better. In Jeremiah chapter 2, we have forsaken the spring of living water, and have dug our own cisterns, broken cisterns, that cannot hold water.

[6 : 57] And that applies today, just as much as it applied during the time of the prophet Jeremiah. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, and each of us has turned to his own way.

But that is not the Lord's way. That is not the way that the Lord wants for a wayward humanity. But it is the natural tendency of fallen man and woman.

And so as a result of that, we have become hopelessly lost, spiritually speaking. We've become bogged down. We've become entangled. We're like people who are groping about in the fog, having no sense of direction, no light to guide us, getting deeper and deeper into the mire.

When I was young, I grew up in London, and I can distinctly remember the fogs of the early 1950s. We lived near to a park, and you could wander onto a field in that park, and if the fog came down, you would be totally lost.

It was a field that we used to play football in. We were totally familiar with it. But with the London fog that killed so many people, you could become totally lost.

[8 : 13] And that's how it is for man or woman without the guidance of the Lord Jesus Christ. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way.

And Isaiah is not here stating that mankind has gone a little to the right or a little to the left, that despite our wanderings, we're still heading, roughly speaking, in the right direction.

He says each has turned to his own way. It's a radical departure from the way that God has mapped out for us. God says this is the way.

Walk in it. But our response has been, no, I will not walk your way. I will choose my own way, and I will follow my own leadings.

Solomon in Proverbs chapter 14, there is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death. There is a way that seems right to man, but in the end it leads to death.

[9 : 16] In Psalm 18, we read there, As for God, his way is perfect. The word of the Lord is flawless. That's any departure from God's way.

It's a departure from perfection. To oppose God, to choose any way, but his way is to sin and is to rebel against him.

It is to choose death instead of life. And I wonder in the United Kingdom today, how many people are walking according to their own way, rather than following the way of the Lord.

And the Bible tells us, Jesus tells us that there are two ways, not three or four ways, as there seems to be in the world of politics, although there were only two ways many years ago.

There is the narrow way, and that is the way that follows in the footsteps of Jesus, seeking to obey him, seeking to honor him. It's the narrow way that will lead us eventually into heaven and the reception by the living God.

[10 : 21] And there is the broad highway, the way which most people are walking on, the broad highway which will eventually take the people walking on it into a lost eternity.

We might ask ourselves today, despite the fact that we attend church on a regular basis, which way are we following? Are we on the narrow way? Are we following in the footsteps of Jesus? Are we seeking to honor him? Or are we following the way of the world? And so we might ask the question, what is God to do?

How is he to guide us back onto his way? And as I said at the beginning, sheep need a shepherd. And so the Lord has provided us with a shepherd, one who will never desert the flock, one who will protect it from ravenous enemies, one who will lead and guide his sheep to green pastures and still waters.

Jesus says, I am the good shepherd. Now when you go back to the original Greek, it is, I am the shepherd, the beautiful one. That's how it is literally translated.

[11 : 34] He's not just a good shepherd, but he is the beautiful shepherd. He's the flawless shepherd. He is the perfect shepherd. He's the shepherd which we find so many pictures of in the Bible, one who will guide his sheep, one who will take the lost lamb on his shoulders and bring it home, one who will go out into the wilderness and search for the lost lamb until he finds it, rejoicing because he has found his lost sheep.

He came to seek and to save the lost. And we're all lost until we are found by the good shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ. But what is to prevent us from wandering away again, time after time, as we read in the Old Testament Scriptures, despite the Lord's grace, despite his kindness towards them, in restoring them, in forgiving them their sins, and yet they wandered away time and time again.

The Lord had brought them back into the fold, but then they wandered off again. Was that not the main lament of all of the prophets, not just Isaiah, but every single one of them?

So God's solution is that not only will he send us a shepherd, but he will instill a desire in the hearts of his flock to heed the shepherd's voice. Jesus says, the sheep listen to his voice.

My sheep know me, and they listen to my voice. They follow him because they know his voice. A natural, unregenerate person does not know that voice, will not listen to it.

[13 : 19] They continue stubbornly in their own way. But God instills that desire to heed the shepherd's voice by giving us a new heart.

And I wonder how many of us gathered here in churches in Scotland today, how many of us have been given a new heart to respond to the call and the cry of the shepherd?

And we might ask ourselves the question, why do we need a new heart? What's wrong with the heart that we have, naturally speaking? Well, in Jeremiah 17, the heart is deceitful above all things. We can deceive ourselves that everything is going well. We can safely continue along the way that we've been following for many years. We can ignore the Lord and his demands.

And so the Lord, who is concerned for his sheep, gave us a new heart. I will gather in Ezekiel, I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.

[14 : 23] I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

We read that in Ezekiel chapter 36. Ezekiel, like the other prophets around him, is not saying that wayward humanity has suddenly come to its senses and has decided to turn around and to walk in a different direction.

Did you notice here in that passage in Ezekiel how often the Lord said, I will, I will, I will, I will sprinkle clean water on you.

I will cleanse you from all your impurities. I will give you a new heart. I will remove from you your heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit in you.

[15 : 28] You see, it's all a work of God. It's all a work of God and of God alone so that no man or woman can boast that they themselves gave their life to the Lord and suddenly turned around from walking in one direction to walking in another.

And we might ask ourselves, well, how does he give us a new heart? How does he take away this heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh? Because it was our own waywardness that has hardened our hearts and calcified our hearts over the generations.

With each step along the way of rebellion, our hearts getting harder and harder, calcifying with each successive sin, each successive refusal to heed the word of the Lord.

And the answer is that God took the sins of his people and he laid them on the head of the shepherd who is also the lamb of God. Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The one who is the good shepherd is also the lamb who takes away the sins. And the Lord has laid on him, we read in this passage of Scripture, the iniquity of us all.

[16:40] And in John chapter 10, the good shepherd says, Jesus lays down his life for the sheep. God made him who knew no sin to become sin in our place.

And we read here in this passage, he was stricken by God. He was smitten by God. He was afflicted. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities.

He was punished in order to bring us peace. Wounded that we might be healed. And as the shepherd takes upon himself our transgressions and as he is willing to pay the price for our many sins, which is death, so being enabled by God's Spirit to believe in Jesus, we get in place of our stony hearts a new heart, a soft heart, a heart of flesh, a heart that is able to respond in love to the love that God has lavished upon us.

He was delivered over to death, we read in Romans 4, for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. And as our sin has been dealt with, as our sin has been taken away and as we have received a new and a receptive heart, hearts that respond to the words of the shepherd, words that respond to his love.

So he didn't just give us a new heart, but he promised to put his Spirit in us. He promised to take his Holy Spirit, the third person of the glorious Trinity and instill that Spirit within us.

[18:20] And so we not only have a new heart, but we also have a pacemaker to keep us in step with the good shepherd. And what shepherd does not survey his flock with a sense of satisfaction?

He sees them at peace, he sees them cropping away at the green grass, he sees them sitting contentedly as they chew the cud, safe and secure under the watchful eye of their shepherd.

And so it is with Jesus. He looks out at his people and he surveys them with a sense of satisfaction because he loves every one of them equally.

We must never imagine that somehow God had a greater love for Paul or for Peter or Andrew or any of the apostles in the Bible than he has for you and I.

His love, the suffering that Christ endured on the cross was the same for every single believer from the least to the greatest. And so Jesus looks out at his flock in every generation and he has a sense of satisfaction because he knows that he has freed them from their sins, he has freed them from the prospect of a lost eternity.

[19:39] He has brought them a home to meet with his father. He has willingly paid the price for our defiance and for our refusal to listen to the father's voice and walk in his ways.

And we read in verse 11 here, out of the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied. He shall see and be satisfied.

The result is men and women at peace just like a flock of sheep in a field. Not just peace as the world speaks of peace but that shalom, that heavenly peace, that vertical dimension of peace that means that we are at peace with God and that is the most important aspect of peace that there can possibly be.

The peace that passes all understanding. The peace that means that we are known by God and we are loved by God and he has given us a new heart that enables us to love him in return.

In 1 Peter, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed for you were like sheep going astray but now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

[21:04] We all like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way. Amen. And may the Lord bless to us his thoughts and meditations on his word.

We thank you eternal God for the wonder of your grace that you should send your son into this dark and sin sick world to seek and to save that which is lost.

We thank you that we have a shepherd who will never desert us who will never run away and leave us to the predators who would seek to destroy us. We thank you that the good shepherd laid down his own life for the sake of his sheep.

And Lord how wonderful it is to know of your love and of your protection and of all that you do for us on a daily basis. We thank you for those who have gone before us those who set a good example those who pointed us to the Lord Jesus Christ those who are no longer with us here physically but those who are now in that heavenly pasture seeing the good shepherd not through the eye of faith but seeing him even as he is in all his risen glory.

Remember the family who mourn and we commend them to you O Lord. So bless us now and bless us until we meet again but be your will later on today and wherever your word is preached from one time zone to another may it bring a healing may it bring joy may it bring hope may it bring a sense of direction and may it bring peace and all that we ask is in Jesus name and for his sake Amen.

[22 : 42] We conclude by singing from Psalm 43 in the Psalter Psalm 43 in the Scottish Psalter and we sing verses 3 to 5 that's on page 264 O send thy light forth and thy truth let them be guides to me and bring me to thine holy hill even where thy dwellings be then will I to God's altar go to God my chiefest joy yea God my God thy name to praise my harp I will employ.

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I will employ I will employ why why art thou then cast out my soul what to discourage thee and why with vexing thoughts art thou disquieted disquieted in me still trust in God for him to praise good gods I yet shall have thee of my

God that is her health my God my God my that doth me save that doth me save and now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit one God rest and remain with you all now and forever amen