

# He shall feed his flock like a shepherd

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[ 0 : 00 ] We shall turn now to the book of the prophet Isaiah and the 40th chapter and we shall read to verse 11. Isaiah 40 and 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 young.

Now of course God is not as we are, the whole mode of God's existence is different from ours.

And so we can understand God only in terms of various images and figures of speech.

And when he speaks to us he himself uses a large number of such figures and images. He is brought before us sometimes as the creator, the maker, sometimes as king, sometimes as lord, sometimes as an owner, sometimes as judge, sometimes as father, sometimes as mother.

[ 1 : 26 ] But perhaps one of the most tender of all those images is the image of God as a shepherd.

We find that image of course in the Great Shepherd Psalm in Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd. We saw it also in the Gospel of John, the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, as the good shepherd.

And we see it here as well in Isaiah, this succinct expression of the same great idea of God Almighty as the shepherd of his people.

And I want for a moment this morning to reflect on this language, on this image of God as shepherd and explore for a little its relevance to our own situations today.

Remember first of all that this shepherd is one who knows his sheep. He knows and we know him.

[ 2 : 40 ] I know my sheep and my sheep know me. And it is of course an astonishing and deeply moving thing that God, who has so many other concerns, is yet so familiar with each one of ourselves.

He knows us in our identity, who each single one of his own flock actually are.

Now many of you are shepherds yourselves and unlike me you can tell one sheep from another and you know your own sheep. You know the history and the needs of each one of them.

But when we reflect on the vast extent of the flock of the Lord Jesus, this great multitude that no one can number, this flock so scattered through all the ages of time and across all the countries on the face of the earth.

So many languages, so many cultures and yet the Lord knows each one of us individually. Our names are individually in his own book of life.

[ 4 : 03 ] And his names are engraved on the palms of his hands. And it's as if the Lord can't make a move, can't use his hands without seeing our names rise before him.

We are not simply some vague mass of humanity or even some worldwide church. We are of course both of those things. But also each one of us is an individual, an esteemed person with our own situations rising directly before the Lord.

And we may feel this morning that our gathering here is so insignificant. And yet God knows we are here. And God knows every single one who is here.

Each one of us in our own identity so utterly open and so precious before him. And he also knows not simply our identity, but he knows our situations.

He knows our means. Although it's a cliché we often use in prayer, He does know those needs better than we know them ourselves.

[ 5 : 23 ] There are some things that God knows because we have told him. Not that he knows them only because we have told him. But he knows them also because we have told him.

We have shared them with him. We have spread the matter before him. We have perhaps a poor little heart that our needs be known to. And he knows these needs.

But there are so many other needs of which we are unconscious. So many risks and perils of which we are unaware. But the Lord knows them.

There are those things we feel bound to hide from others. There are those things that we ourselves see only vaguely and dimly. There are those things we ourselves are not able to articulate or to put words to.

We couldn't even tell God about them. But God knows. God knows at this moment just where you are.

[ 6 : 29 ] And God knows just what you are feeling. God knows how frightened you are of something. God knows how anxious you are about something.

God knows your phobias. God knows the reasons that you are putting to yourself this morning why you should not come to the Lord's table.

God the shepherd knows each one of his sheep. There is nothing in God himself. Nothing about God himself.

That God does not understand. And that is the greatest glory of God's knowledge. And in comparison to that an exhaustive knowledge of your needs is nothing.

And so I assure you today that God knows your situation. And God cares about it. And within the circle of his eternal covenant God has made and God is making permission to meet that need and to protect you from that danger.

[ 7 : 43 ] I will tell you this God has never been without knowing you. God has never been without knowing your situation without caring from the whole eternity.

God has known. And it is no necessary part of God's existence. It is a part of his existence that arises only from his own voluntary, free will and love for you.

But having freely and eternally chosen to love you God knows you, knows you personally. We speak of ourselves having a personal knowledge of God but he has a personal knowledge of you and a personal knowledge of your situation.

And there is this too God knows your voice and God can distinguish your voice from every other sound on the planet.

Indeed from every other sound in the universe. The best universe is full of sounds. Some malorious and some cacophonous.

[ 8 : 58 ] Some very gentle, very quiet and just two small voices and others of them thunders. And yet in the midst of all those other melodies and all those other clushing sounds and all those pears of thunder God can hear you and God can hear you sigh, your groan even the unarticulated longing of your heart God hears.

And God instantly recognises and he knows and in all the sounds that it is you that is so and so calling God knows when we cry from the depths when we cry from the fearful pit and from the mighty clay when we cry from the darkness in which there is no light from the darkness in which there is no sense of the love of God and sometimes no sense of the being of God but even then the child of God amid all her doubts has only one place to go and only one thing to do and so she cries and God hears and God knows that voice instantaneously.

Maybe that's why a prayer would never tell God who's calling. You pick up the phone and you tell who you are but when you cry to God you know that he knows you know instinctively that you don't need to tell him who it is because he knows you and he knows all your needs.

And so that's the first thing this is a shepherd who knows us in our identity and who knows us in our needs and who knows us in and by our Christ too.

The second thing is this the shepherd offers individual and personal care to every single member of his own flock and that's brought out so beautifully in the language of verse 11 here there is the general statement he will hang this flock like a shepherd he will shepherd like a shepherd it's very general and of course God does all these general things and God God does them to every member of the flock he will feed them and he will lead them and he will heal them and he will protect them he'll do all these general shepherding duties and every one of us will share in all of these but then you come to those beautiful specifics that God sing us out special members of that flock

[ 12 : 12 ] I deal with them in such a special way he will gather the worms in his arms and he will cut them in his bosom he will lift them in all of his arms those hands with her names graven upon them and he will hold as I say he says close to his heart in his bosom close to his heart maybe so close to pursue the religion sometimes perhaps you can feel God's heart beating he gathers you in his arms gathers you in close to his bosom those lambs those lambs are not mature they are not sheep sometimes they seem so full of energy they gamble they jump they come out and then in no time at all they are exhausted and the Lord knows that he can't drive the flock at a pace that will exhaust the lambs the weakened members of the flock and so he gathers the lamb and takes it close to his heart this specific attention to our role to each individual and personal need and those of you as shepherds know that sometimes you are to carry not only the lambs but the sheep as well and perhaps on your shoulder because certain sheep they have a certain need or a certain problem but whatever it is

God has given it to fight and said this member of the flock has a special need it's very young it's very exhausted it's lost its mother it's greedy it's lonely it's weak it's afraid it has no stamina it's got maybe some wound or some infection or other and so it is carried and sometimes as I said the mature and the most mature they too have to be carried one of the great mysteries one of the great pastoral challenges is looking at the condition of many of the oldest members of the church and how frail they are in that old age and how needy and how vulnerable and how glorious and how moving it is that in that fragility and in that with broadness behind all those barriers through which we cannot go those things which prevent us making contact but nevertheless

God is still shepherding to one who doesn't know us the one who cannot tell us her needs but still the Lord is carrying not only the lambs in their youth but God is carrying the sheep as well in their maturity because their needs are equally great now of course that doesn't leave us at the need to carry each other and especially the need for the sheep to carry and shepherd the lambs there is a shepherding in which all of us are engaged our responsibility we have towards all the other members of the flock and it was indeed one of the great glories of the church in this island in its origins and I hope still that there was a very well developed culture whereby the sheep carried the lambs and that's why perhaps the Lord said to

Peter feed my sheep feed my lambs feed my sheep he said to him twice feed the sheep because if he feed the sheep then the sheep will feed the lambs so he is the shepherd he is carrying all those who are in special meat for the lambs or other sheep all of their special situations God is carrying them now let's be clear what we mean it doesn't mean that God puts us under an aesthetic or that God puts us to sleep or that God leaves us of our duties or that God so arranges things that we don't feel the pain or feel the darkness I am hoping this morning that the Lord is carrying me as I try to preach this sermon that I hope too that all my faculties of body and mind and imagination are involved in its deliverance well and so my being carried by God does not preclude my own engagement and my own utility and my own effort and energy go back to a simple idea

God we are told in 2 Peter chapter 1 gave us this word by this process that holy men of God spoke as they were carried carried by the spirit of God the prophets as they gave us the great messages the apostles as they gave us theirs Jesus as he preached those great servants and offered those great prayers they were all being carried by God and yet all their faculties were fully engaged and fully involved and yes I want to say to God this morning Lord carry me and carry me through and take me through but I can't say that in the sense that I can't simply myself just engage and let God himself do all the work and I can't expect to be taken through the way that is without cost and without paying to myself but God will carry us and helping us to avail the cost and helping us to carry the load and helping us to overcome the temptation

[ 19 : 57 ] God carrying us God himself giving us the willing and the doing the two things going together so yes God will carry us and because God carries us we can do better than ourselves better indeed than our best we transcend ourselves it means that our patience and our gifts and our experience are not a measure of what we can achieve indeed we have to know that in Christ carried by the shepherd we can do the impossible those things for which we have known the natural gift those things in which we are utterly terrified when God carries us we are able to do those things there is no mountain we can't climb there is no mountain we can't cross there is no burden that we cannot carry so God carries us carries the lambs and God carries the shepherd

God deals with each one of us individually and it is of course also true that this is a shepherd who is characterized by uninfinitesimal compassion he is a shepherd who knows us he is a shepherd who carries us and he is a shepherd who appears with us and who empathizes and sympathizes with us in John 10 we hear about good shepherd speaking and he is speaking there as the one who is in our nature the one who is taking my kind of body taking my kind of soul my kind of mind my kind of emotions how often we have to come over this ground this mighty fundamental fact of the incarnation of God becoming man this which underlies absolutely which is the foundation upon which everything else lies he has taken our nature he has shared our experiences he knows what it is to be physically exhausted he knows what it is to be downcast he knows what it is to be afraid to be utterly overfairly almost paralyzingly afraid he knows what it is to look at the will of

God and to shudder when God puts in his hand the cup of the wine of astonishment that point of course is brought out so well for us in Revelation 7 where the lamb shall lead them where the actual word used is a word that means that the lamb shall shepherd them and that's the glory on the flock of Jesus Christ it is a lamb a flock led by a lamb shepherded by a lamb I'm sure the sheep must often say that man doesn't know how we feel that man has no knowledge of what it means to be a sheep it's no sympathy no compassion and sometimes perhaps we feel that God doesn't understand and sometimes he knows nothing of this kind of situation but of course there are things of which he knows nothing he knows nothing of sin he knows nothing at a personal level of having to war against the flesh and himself he knows nothing of personal guilt and of course none of those limitations in any way it reduces his efficiency of competence as a saviour indeed quite the contrary he is a greater saviour because he knows none of those sinful weaknesses that so plague us but all those sinless infirmities the Lord understands whatever you stand today it is so important to know that and to know that he feels with you and to know that in and around his sympathy there is the sympathy of God the Father and God the Son because of this mysterious fact of the Trinity so that when the one is the three are it was

God the Son alone who took flesh it was God the Son alone who died on the cross of Calvary but God the Son is one and the same being one and the same God with God the Father and one and the same being with God the Holy Spirit and where the Son was God the Father was and where the Son was God the Holy Spirit was and of all we cannot say that the Father died or that God died such language is quite inappropriate but we can't say that in some way through that union between Father Son and Spirit God the Spirit and God the Father tasted the death and the suffering alone with God the Son so that in the Father and in the Spirit too there is sympathy because as the

Lord said in his own suffering I am not alone the Father is with me and in that being with him the Father himself learned compassion that Holy Spirit threw me over himself without thought to God that spirit was with him that spirit understands God the Father God the Son God the Holy Spirit all that through a full of God gathered up into this miraculous fact of the divine compassion and we had a couple of other points briefly under this heading the resourcefulness of the shepherd it goes back again to just where I've been who is this shepherd this shepherd is God's eternal son through whom he made the worlds the shepherd is

[ 27 : 21 ] Lord Jehovah the Lord is my shepherd the shepherd is the triune God and the whole fullness of God is found in the person of God the Son so that we might say that if the Son alone were the shepherd yet we have the whole of God shepherding us yet we have to say that it is the triune God the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit who shepherded us each of them shepherding us in his own way it's a tremendous thing that you are being shepherded by the triune God we're all being shepherded by the triune God there is a use of language if you look at verses 10 and 11 for a moment you see we looked at the shepherd gathering the lambs in his arms thy mighty hands the heavens have made maybe the lamb is frightened when he sees those arms you go back to verse 10 behold the

Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him it's that mighty arm that sovereign arm of sovereign God it is that that shepherds us it's those mighty hands that feed us the lamb is in the center of the throne this lamb of omnipotence this lamb of omnis use this lamb of omnipresence this this this lamb the shepherd who is able simultaneously to give personal attention to every single member of his flock to us today at this moment in Korea to those in New Orleans to those here in the church in Can Long he is if I have changed the figure wiping away tears simultaneously from a sheep in each of those areas he is carrying a lamb in each of those areas he has got the whole warrior in his hands he is the mighty

God the everlasting father the prince of peace his resources so unbounded and so illimitable so able to do the forest though there's no shortage of resource no shortage of wisdom no shortage of anything at all that's why you can go pray ask for those things that Paul begins to try to specify in his great plain efficiency and then it has to go on into those great high pyramids exceeding abundantly above what we're able to ask I think because those arms are above what we're able to ask or imagine and his throne and governance and dominion are above what we're able to ask or imagine and so his care for you has to be wonderful in the strictest and most glorious sense of that simple terror never hold back because you think you're asking too much or because you think it's impossible because we're addressing this shepherd with his mighty resources and there's the point as well which perhaps we might well have perhaps give more time to the price he has paid for you he knows you he gives individual attention he has such extraordinary compassion he has such resources all of these things so important and so true but above all

I lay down my life for the sheep the church of God which he has purchased with his own blood we must not try to qualify or modify that the one who died on the cross of Calvary was the son of God who is God the son you can imagine how often have you said perhaps that's too much the price for that sheep that's when you buy not when you sell but when you buy that's too much what did he have to pay the good shepherd he laid down his life his very self not as offerings not as human nature but himself he laid down he gave he loved his own he loved them from eternity knew each one from eternity and he came into this world in pursuance of that love and in pursuance of its purposes to lay down his life a ransom for many and as he sat on his mother's knee and as he listened to her and others reading the word of

God to him from the Old Testament he began to learn day by day week by week what his own destiny was and what his love would one day cost and because he was human and his mind was finite he learned that only step by step what it meant to be the Messiah and what it meant to be the Savior of the world and the Redeemer of his people and he went down day by day year by year seeing more and more of what it cost and by the time he was baptised he had a fair idea yet he didn't know it fully but as the end approached he became every plainer he became so plain in Gethsemane for it was good cost he knew there was a cup a cup with a violent death he knew that from an early age then he looked at it in Gethsemane and looked closely into what he saw terrified in over

[ 34 : 48 ] Wellington and all of his him shrug back or not with a sin for shrinking a shrinking from the pain though maybe there was that too but a shrinking from what he was to lose and what would it be like not the black hole by itself though that was awful enough but the black hole without Abba the black hole forsaken the black hole and the curse due to the sin of the world the loss of God that was the thing and the coalition with the holiness of God that was the thing from which he shrank there he was the whole cost sometimes in youth we say we're not afraid to die but perhaps as we stand on its threshold it's not quite so easy there it was for him but I'm driving towards this having loved his

Lord who who were in the world he loved them to the end and the end was what he saw in Gethsemane as he had never seen before what was in the cup and there he might have said it's too much and there he might have said Abba he said human nature I just can't human nature can't do that and maybe he said to you Abba my love for you is such that I just can't go into a situation where I lose contact with you and I don't have you can't do that but no he said not my will but thine be done and he said let's depart let's go let's go he loved them to the end when he saw the full implications of the love and the full amount of that cost he laid down his life for the sheep no one took it from me

I laid down of myself there is a commandment a covenant between me and my father there is a love that binds me to my people there is a holy spirit upholding me with grace indomitable and in that strength he goes and loves to the end laying down his life for the sheep everyone has come into this world at the cost of maternal pain and sometimes times that's a very powerful biblical image the pain of childbirth we have been born again by even greater pain by the pain of the cross of Calvary each one of us blood bought the blood of the Son of God and we should feel this moment, this moment, each one of us, the sense of obligation stemming from that and the obligation to stand forth and say to the world

I've been bought with the blood of Christ and I want the world to know I want everyone to know you know you know I am so precious to God God God nourished me so much God thinks the world of me but that's not enough God thinks his Son of me did not spare his own Son so blood bought sheep every one of us I want to close by changing the focus for a moment and looking not at the shepherd but at the sheep and there are just two points the second of which shall develop a little the first one is this my sheep know my voice just as he knows the Father the Father and the Father's voice and just as he knows your voice so you know his voice a stranger will they not follow and how desperately and overwhelmingly important it is in this confused world and this confused church a stranger will they not follow and how much our young people need to have ears attuned to the voice of the one through shepherd and how important and how important that they don't follow a stranger and how important and how important that they don't follow a stranger you know it's not in the last analysis that we believe in Christ because of scripture but we believe in scripture because of Christ we hear his voice that's my master's voice that's the shepherd's voice

Christ himself the attestation of the word of God we love it because it tells us about him and we know his voice there we know his voice in the scripture we know his voice in the preaching it's him it's his voice the tones the accents the emphasis the words the lessons the concerns are whose who is his voice the tone the accents the emphasis the words the lessons the concerns are whose who is his voice and it's so important that we keep close to him and walk in the spirit that we keep in step with the spirit so that then there is no danger of our mistaking the voice of a stranger for the voice of the Lord and the second thing is they follow him a stranger will they not follow my sheep hear my voice and my sheep they follow me and how beautiful it is that that's how we came here in this island to describe conversion we started following we started following the Lord following following the means of grace

[ 42 : 03 ] Jesus said to the apostles follow me and they forsook all and they followed him and that's what we have to do we have to follow the Lamb wherever he leads wherever he leads and sometimes he leads to and through beautiful places as he led us this morning across that mountainous road and that scenery to the church here and to this destination with all its own very special spiritual beauty green pastures and still waters and straight paths and a camp that's overflowing that's where he often leads us and you do credit and don't convey the impression that it's all suffering and all darkness and all chasing and all pain there's some of that the Lord is my shepherd though I lack nothing and you keep telling the world if you've got problems tell God about them don't tell the world about them tell the world that you lack nothing you've got a great shepherd its green pastures still waters straight paths a cup overflowing ah yes sometimes there are enemies yes sometimes but even then there shall tables spread in the presence of our foes but yes sometimes too the valley of the shadow of death dark shadows and sometimes great deep ravines sometimes rocky paths that give you vertigo and sometimes a mist that descends and clouds that obscure your vision sometimes storms and tempests that lead us utterly and totally confused sometimes some of these sometimes a darkness in which there is no light no sense of the love of God no sense of your own salvation no sense of the glory and the personal relevance to you of the promises of God but the thing is the shepherd never puts you into ravine never drives you he leads you he goes before them and leads them out there is no place he sends you that he has not been no darkness no pain no loneliness no fear through which he has not been and at which he is not with you thy rod and thy staff sometimes you can't hear but you hear perhaps his staff touching the floor anyway we follow him wherever he leads where he leads where he will lead we don't know we don't know we don't know and where he's led we don't want to go back there's never a going back there's never a duplication of any day in her life enormously important the only way to go is forward that's the only way to go the past irrevocable the future fleeting the present fleeting or in the future within her grasp if he tarries and follow him whatever the cost it was easy when I started

it may not be so easy today it may be even less easy tomorrow many many of our focused art don't persevere we lose so many the care of our thirty-somethings the cares of this world the receiptfulness of riches the pressures and attractions of our careers the lust of power the call of affluence the pain of shame of isolation the unkindnesses of God's people and the sometimes cruelty of God's church and so there's a cost and when the cost kicks in do we stop following the shepherd

I want you to know how great the shepherd is it's here we follow it's here we follow the church will break many hard don't you break the church's hard make a resolve a two-fold resolve today you will never stop following the shepherd that's the easy one it's the easy one and you never give up on the church follow whatever he needs and follow whatever the cost may God bless his word let's enjoy and pray let's enjoy and pray oh Lord we ask you a blessing upon your word we ask grace to respond and to obey and as you ask us Lord to follow you so we ask you to hold us and to keep us from not following we ask you Lord that you will preserve and protect especially all those on the threshold of discipleship all the lambs but I think too Lord of so many of our precious older members of the flock unable through ill health to be here and locked away in the prisons of their own frailty and their own mental disorientations and yet you love them be with them we pray in Jesus name Amen