

Shepherd Us from Harm

I want to begin this article by simply stating an important biblical principle: Because God is completely perfect, it stands to reason that, the more that Christians seek, by grace, to rightly know God, the more we'll love him. And the more we love him, the more we'll trust him for all the, sometimes difficult, things that happen in our lives, rather than consistently finding ourselves discouraged and discontented. Scottish pastor, professor, and theologian Dr. Sinclair Ferguson writes, "Knowledge and love of God create an environment in which discouragement and a sense of depression or spiritual desertion find difficulty in breathing.....I do not believe that it is possible to overstress the importance of this principle. Of course, it is unglamorous; but there is much in the Christian life that is unglamorous. The important thing is not its glamor, but that it's God's way. And because it's his way, it works."

As we begin a new series today, we'll see that there's a consistent theme that's running through Psalm 80, as well as several of Asaph's other Psalms, i.e., patterns of disobedience and a failure to repent, leading to God's punishment of his covenant people. We'll see in this series that—even though the children of Israel are soon to be punished because of their sins—this Psalm is an important reminder of God's care and compassion for his covenant people. We see this care and compassion depicted almost immediately. "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!" (vs. 1a) Even though the Old Testament often depicts God as a Shepherd, interestingly, in the Psalms, God being called a Shepherd only appears *directly* in this passage and in the well-known 23rd Psalm. Along with that, the phrase "Shepherd of Israel" is only given here in all the Old Testament.

As we think of God's *care and compassion* for his people, the metaphor of the Shepherd watching over his sheep is one of the most beautiful and endearing metaphors in all the Scriptures. This is important on more than one level, e.g., not only is God the Shepherd who shows care and compassion, but the reason that such care is needed is that the sheep are so *unable to care for themselves*. In studying why God's people are called sheep in the Bible, scholars remind us that sheep are very timid, fearful, and completely *dependent* (e.g., Joel Beeke, *The Lord Shepherding His Sheep*). Left alone, sheep will perish because they need care, guidance, and protection day and night. Sheep cannot provide their own food, and they need protection from enemies, as well as protection from injuries. When a sheep is injured, it can't care for itself. Sheep are also very vulnerable to attack and will rarely detect danger until it's too late. So, then, sheep are *completely dependent*.

Sheep are also *foolish*. They will leave lush pasture and water and wander off where there's no food at all, or they can be found nibbling on plants and undergrowth that can make them sick, or even kill them. If a sheep wanders far enough it will get lost and cannot find its way back home again. They must also be protected from excessive

weather such as too much heat or rain. In addition to being *foolish*, sheep are also *stubborn*. When a loving shepherd attempts to care for a wound or wash his sheep to control external parasites and sickness, the animal will fight the shepherd with all its strength, because it doesn't understand that what the shepherd is doing is for the good of the sheep. Does any or all of this remind us of ourselves at times? It should! This and much more is exactly why God's people are compared to sheep so often in the Scriptures.

The end of verse 1 provides another very important picture of God's care and compassion. "*You who* are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth." This phrase refers to the ark of the covenant which was covered with two golden images of angels. Within the ark were the two stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments. We're also told that atop the ark was a solid gold cover that was called the "mercy seat." It was in this context that God said to Moses: "There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel." (Exodus 25:22) John Calvin writes, "The mercy-seat was a pledge of the presence of God, where he had promised to be near his people and hear their prayers." The mercy seat is where the high priest sprinkled the atoning blood of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement for a sin offering. (Leviticus 16:15)

At the very beginning of this Psalm, we see a picture of the Shepherd caring for the sheep, along with the mercy seat which depicts God's presence, as well as forgiveness for sins. This imagery sets in place the care and compassion that God has for his people. Even though we've sinned, God has made a way, in Christ, for Christians to continue in a caring and compassionate relationship with him. What a blessing for Christians to know that our tender Shepherd cares for and watches over us. He will Shepherd his sheep from harm according to his perfect will for each of our lives.

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