

Our Shepherd Isaiah 40:9-17

From the time we are born we are waiting on someone in hope. We hope for someone to show up and do something we need. When we are a baby, we cry because we hope someone feeds us. When we are child and can feed ourselves, we wait on our parents to take us somewhere or get us something we can't reach. When we're a teenager we hope for a teacher or a coach to show us something we don't know. We hope for an admissions committee to validate us. As an adult we hope our boss treats us right or if we're the boss, we hope someone is a good hire. We hope our spouse is a good person, who validates our love. We hope our kids do the right thing and make good decisions.

And sometimes that person delivers. Our hope was justified.

Life is a series of hopes that we wait to see unfold. And often our hopes are in other people. We wait to see if they will validate our hopes and give us that thing we are looking for.

Sometimes they deliver. And sometimes they don't.

And so much in life depends upon in whom we place our hopes. I have heard a lot of people tell their life story and the ones that go badly usually begin with a misplaced hope. And I have heard a lot of people tell great stories because they put their hope in Jesus.

God's people struggled and suffered because they placed their hope in people rather than the Lord.

But they were not left hopeless because Jesus provides even for our misplaced hopes.

Chapter 40 begins the section of the Book of Isaiah that addresses Israel's captivity in the nation of Babylon. God's people saw their capital city destroyed, their lands ravaged, crops burned, their people killed and their temple—the very place—where they believed the Creator of everything made His home—razed to the ground. The city of Jerusalem was besieged for about 14 months—surrounded by the Babylonian army, camped by the tens of thousands outside the city walls. When it was all over God's people were carried off into exile 550 miles to the east to the vicious, depraved, corrupt city of Babylon where they lived for 70 years as servants and slaves.

This came about because God's people had misplaced hope. They led themselves be led by kings who did not love the Lord and didn't particularly care for them. What they loved was power. We don't have time to go into the sins of people like Ahab and Manasseh, Menahem, Ahaz, Amon, Queen Jezebel or Jehoakim. All these kings and the queen are described with a simple line—they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

Their last king—a man named Zedekiah—who became king when he was 21 years old—is a great example of this. In 2 Chronicles we are told exactly what Zedekiah did and how it caused disaster for God's people:

He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD, the God of Israel. All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations. And they polluted the house of the LORD that he had made holy in Jerusalem. The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion

on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy.

2 Chronicles 36:13-16

Zedekiah's last act as king was to lead his army during the dead of the night to punch a hole in the wall of the city and run for their lives over the hills surrounding Jerusalem out in the desert. Unfortunately for Zedekiah, the Babylonians ran him down and his army. Zedekiah was captured His sons were killed ending his royal line and he was blinded and carted off to Babylon where he eventually died in prison.

This is the kind of leadership God's people were used to in their kings.

God's people knew something that we are seeing today.

They had a crisis of leadership. God's people hoped in the kings of this world, mortal, fallible, sinful, self-interested men. 400 years before the Lord spoke to Isaiah, they demanded a king and the Lord gave them what they wanted. They weren't satisfied with the Lord Himself as their king, their leader, their shepherd. And the Lord promised His people that the day was coming when they would cry out because of the king they had chosen to have for themselves but on that day the Lord would not answer their cry.

This is a constant human temptation. We hope for a leader. We hope a human being can protect us, guide us, inspire us, make the world make sense—even define who we are. We hope a flawed, sinful, broken human being is at least good enough to be a buffer against this dangerous world. We hope for someone to defeat our enemies, carry us on their back. It is something everyone, everywhere it tempted to do—put their hope in someone less than Jesus. And the world has been plunged into darkness, chaos, confusion, catastrophe because we chose a flawed human being to complete us and make us right. This is true not only collectively as people, nations and cultures. It's also true individually.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle said that the first job of a leader is to:

...prevent men from ever becoming enslaved. It is a habit of tyrants never to like a man with a spirit of dignity and independence.

We want to be led and if we are not led by God, we will choose to be led and enslaved by someone else—someone who we think will give us what we want—whatever what we want happens to be. There is a danger in choosing the wrong leader as God's people did in their kings. When we place our greatest hopes in the wrong person, we end up becoming slaves.

But Isaiah shares some good news about someone who is coming. It such good news that Aristotle said we need to go tell it on a mountain and to not be afraid to make this bold, world-bending claim because it is absolutely happening:

**Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"**

Isaiah 40:9

“Behold your God” Isaiah said. Here is your God. Let me describe Him to you. Let me tell you exactly who He is and, trust me, you’re going to like this. This is good news. And then Isaiah goes on to explain two crucial characteristics for God.

First, the Lord is powerful.

**Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.**

Isaiah 40:10

Have you ever been stunned by the absolute power of something? A large animal? A storm? The weight of an object? The ocean?

Confession time: when I was 17, I was able to buy ring side seats for professional wrestling. I got up at 3 AM to make sure my best friend and I were first in line. We got to watch up close some great, legendary wrestlers—Hulk Hogan, Jake the Snake Roberts, Randy Savage, Ted DiBiasie, George the Animal Steele. It was a Who’s Who of wrestling greats from the 1980’s. But the one who impressed me the most was Andre the Giant. Andre the Giant is the largest man to ever (ahem) compete in professional wrestling. Some of you will only know him from the movie “The Princess Bride.” He was 7 feet 4 inches tall and weighed 520 pounds. He wore a size 24 shoe. His hands were sixteen inches across. His neck was 24 inches around and his wrists were 11 inches around.

He stood just inches and for the only time I can recall in my life, I remember a primal feeling of fear welling up inside me just because of someone’s sheer size. I watched him grapple against men who weighed 270 pounds with hardly an inch of fat on their bodies, muscle-bound, with huge biceps and legs—former college and professional football players. These were men who under normal circumstances could crush someone like me with hardly a thought but they were totally at his whim. In fact I even heard Hulk Hogan say once that they had to let Andre do whatever he wanted to do because none of them could even come close to stopping him. These grown, strapping, muscle-bound men were like little children to him because he was twice their size.

That’s one kind of powerful.

The word powerful does not begin to approximate how Isaiah describes God. We could also say formidable or mighty, fierce or great, overwhelming, overpowering, forceful, potent, commanding, dominant. We could use a lot of words to describe God but words will fall short. We don’t have words for God.

But this is really one of the first things we want to know with a leader—are they powerful, are they potent, able? Are they competent? Can they get the job done? Can they do what they say they are going to do?

And the Lord can. Jesus can.

What is the practical application of Jesus’ unassailable power in our life? It is one thing to say that the Lord is powerful. Isaiah tells us:

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations

are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.

Isaiah 40:15-17

Nothing is greater Jesus—the nations and their governments, their kings, their rulers, their armies, the propagandists, state police, are like a drop in the bucket, dust on the scales. Next to the Lord, they are emptied of their power.

Jesus is greater. Does anyone here recall the story from John's Gospel of Jesus standing on trial before the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate? He had been beaten, mocked and at trial the entire night. And the Roman Governor Pilate, who had the power to release Him with a word or even a wave of his hand, asked Jesus if He was a King. And Jesus replied, "My kingdom is greater than everything you see around you."

And Jesus was right. The mighty Roman Empire would one day bow down to Jesus. And His very name would split history. And today Rome is only known in the history books but the Kingdom Jesus spoke about continues on today—right here, right now, in this very place—Jesus' Kingdom will outlive the sun and the stars.

So, as citizens of that Kingdom, we can claim it, we can announce it, we can allow it to permeate the very fiber of our existence with confidence, without fear. We can say things and do things that this world considers crazy, that seem desperately opposed to our self-interest, that seem dreadfully impractical. And we can do with confidence because we know that in comparison to God—all the armies that have ever marched, the navies that have sailed, all the kings that have ever ruled, all the despots and tyrants are less than nothing.

Above Westminster Abbey in London are ten statues of Christian martyrs from the 20th century. Some of their names you will know. Some you would not and among the ones most of us don't know is a Chinese pastor named Wang Zhiming. Zhiming was arrested in 1969 during the Cultural Revolution. He was never officially accused of anything. Although he was forced to wear a dunce hat publicly that said: "Spy and Lackey of the Imperialists" and the government subjected him to public ridicule and encouraged people to 'drown him with their spit.' He spent four years in jail and was executed on December 29, 1973 for being a counterrevolutionary. His execution took place in front of 10,000 people. And after him, his family was persecuted—imprisoned, persecuted, sent to labor camps, unable to hold jobs. But if the goal of the Chinese government was to stamp out the Gospel and wipe out the name of Jesus Christ from their land, they failed.

When Zhiming began preaching the Gospel there were less than 3000. Today, there are more than 30,000 and hundreds of churches. His son said: "My father fought against devils in those dark days and triumphed."

During dark days and dark times, this world will thump its chest and try to beat down those who claim Jesus. Don't let it. He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world—Jesus promised.

The nations are a drop in the bucket, dust on the scales. The kings, despots, rulers, tyrants, powers and principalities are nothing compared to King Jesus.

Second, the Lord is a shepherd.

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.

Isaiah 40:11

This is the other thing we want to know about a leader is “Do they care for me? Do they have my best interests at heart?”

When I was a kid my best friend’s family raised about 30 sheep. They had a small family farm, with fences and a barn. One day as my friend was going outside, he opened the backdoor and was trampled by a herd of sheep. They had all gone to the backdoor of the house and as soon as the door cracked the entire herd burst inside and began running around their one-story, three-bedroom ranch. And if you know how those homes are laid out it is a lot like a track with a circular-like path running from the living room, kitchen, dining room and parlor. The sheep knocked over tables, chairs, trash cans. They slipped on the linoleum and wood floors, and knocked pictures from the walls. Eventually they were able to get the sheep out of the house and back into the pen—but not before they trashed their house and injured several people in his family. Someone left the gate to the pen open and the sheep made a break for it.

A couple years ago, about 400 sheep grazing in Eastern Turkey fell to their death by walking right off a 50 foot tall cliff. One sheep went over the edge and the rest followed. There were actually 1400 sheep altogether but the last 1000 were able to land on the bodies of those who went first.

In both cases, these sheep were without a shepherd. In my friend’s case, the sheep were lost beyond the fence without a shepherd. In the other case all the shepherds were eating breakfast out of sight from the sheep and neglected their duty.

It’s a common misconception that sheep are dumb. They’re not. They can easily pick out their shepherd’s voice. They can recognize about 50 other sheep faces and even faces of people. They know their name. Some studies suggest they even feel emotion.

But sheep are followers. They need to be led. And absent a real leader—a good shepherd—they will follow anyone else—even another sheep who leads them to run around crazed inside a three-bedroom ranch home or even off a cliff. And because sheep are defenseless, they need someone to take care of them...constantly. It’s a bad combination—naïve and helpless—like a country boy travelling alone to the city for the first time, arriving on a bus in the middle of Los Angeles. Suddenly, a man announcing himself as the wallet inspector arrives and asks to look at his billfold to make sure everything is in order.

Not dumb. Just naïve and helpless. That’s a sheep.

And just about the most common metaphor in the Bible for human beings is sheep.

Try not to be offended...but the truth sometimes hurts.

But it’s okay, because when sheep have a shepherd, things go well.

And we do. The Lord is your Shepherd. Jesus is absolutely committed to you.

Not only does Isaiah tell us that—but Jesus does too.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

John 10:11-15

Shepherd is a striking metaphor for God to adopt for Himself. To the people who knew it, it would have been shocking. And Jesus alludes to this when He said the shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. It was the job of the shepherd to give up his life, to sacrifice himself to save the sheep. In the economy of tending the flock, the life of the sheep came first and the shepherd was second. Shepherds were a unique combination of invaluable and expendable.

But David said to Saul, “Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him.

1 Samuel 17:34-36

David was a skinny-armed, red-faced boy who the Bible implies looked like a girl. But he knew his job, the shepherd’s job was to fight lions and bears because the life of sheep took precedence over his. A shepherd does not care for their own life. They care for the life of the sheep.

Jesus is your good shepherd who laid down His life for you and me.

But who are the bears and lions that our Shepherd slays? Against what enemy does our shepherd Jesus lay down His life?

Its sin. It’s our sin.

Ultimately, we are waiting and hoping for someone to deal with our sin and its consequences. We are hoping for someone to unwind our mistakes, to wash away our guilt, to make things new, to bring meaning to a world robbed of its essence by our faults and failures.

And only Jesus can do that.

Jesus is powerful enough to defeat our enemy of sin and He loves us enough to lay down His life to do it.

So, let me ask you: “Where is your hope?” Let me ask you, “Who are you waiting on to make this world right?”

Is it Jesus? Or is it someone else?

If it is anyone else but Jesus, they will break your hopes and make you a slave.

But if its Jesus, you will be free.

Putting your hope in Jesus begins with asking Him to be your hope, asking Him to be Lord of your life, to lead you. You can ask Him to forgive your sin and deal with your sin and give you new life, asking Jesus power to be poured out on your behalf and asking Him to be your shepherd.

You can do that right now as we come to His table.

Your hope will not be misplaced.