



The Fiery Bones

Jeremiah 20:9

Text

Jeremiah 23:1-8

Topic

God promises Judah that in the future He will regather them as a Shepherd leads sheep to their pasture

Title

"Pasture, Present & Future"

Introduction

If you don't have clear directions it's sure nice to have a GPS. Even so I get into trouble with the lag time. I'm always through the intersection where I was supposed to turn before the voice tells me to turn in 500 feet. I then hear that dreaded electronic rebuke, "recalculating."

I've been in situations where rather than giving directions the other driver wants you to follow him. "Just follow me," seems easy; but the driver of that lead car always ignores you. The very first green light he comes to is guaranteed to turn yellow while he has plenty of time to stop.

Does he stop? *Of course not!* Primal instincts learned over centuries kick-in and he floors it through the yellow light, leaving you to either run the red light or stop.

Does he slow down or pull over so you can catch up? *Of course not!*

Our text is about following. God presents Himself to Judah as their Shepherd. As His sheep they ought to have heard His voice and followed Him. They did not and were being scattered.

Not to worry - He would regather them and bring them into His pasture.

As Christians we know Jesus as our Shepherd. In the Gospel of John He calls Himself the Good Shepherd then says we, His sheep, hear His voice and follow Him.

Well, *we should* follow Him, but we sometimes don't. We hear Him but for a million different reasons we lag behind or go in some contrary direction of our own choosing.

It's too bad because the pasture of the Lord is wonderful. His pasture is the always greener grass.

Our theme will be the wonderful, rich, filling and sustaining pasture that Jesus both desires and designs for His sheep.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Jesus Is The Shepherd Whose Desire Is To Provide Abundant Pasture, and #2 Jesus Is The Shepherd Whose Design Is To Produce Ultimate Pasture.

#1 Jesus Is The Shepherd Whose Desire Is To Provide Abundant Pasture

(v1-4)

I don't think anybody knows how many metaphors, similes, types and illustrations God gives us in the Bible by which to describe and discuss His relationship with us. By far the most endearing in the Old Testament is that of the Shepherd. A truly good shepherd was altogether good towards his sheep - leading them, caring for them, protecting them to the point of risking his own life for every one of them. The picture painted is of the sheep grazing peacefully to their heart's content in a lush green pasture near a refreshing stream while the shepherd, staff in hand, is ever watchful and vigilant.

You can find no fault in a good shepherd.

Nevertheless God gets blamed today for just about everything that happens. I read one article that started with the line, "It's a tough time to be God." It goes on to report that up to two-thirds of Americans blame God whenever something terrible happens.

Let's put that into metaphorical perspective. It would be like saying God is a Shepherd who leads his sheep to the wolves... or over a cliff... or into a rushing river to be swept away and drowned. *Not possible!*

God wanted to shepherd Judah but His undershepherds - the kings, priests, prophets, and elders - led the people astray. And the people, for their part, either lagged behind or went in directions of their own evil desires.

Jeremiah 23:1-2

1 "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!" says the Lord.

2 Therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: "You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings," says the Lord.

The "shepherds" were everyone in positions of leadership. They were to represent God to the people by being good undershepherds but they were not. They mistreated God's flock for their own selfish gain.

God promised to "attend to [them] for the evil of [their] doings." He would see to it justice was ultimately done.

This is where we tend to get angry at God. Why allow them to be undershepherds in the first place? Why let them continue once their abusive character was revealed? Why must we always suffer now and hope for justice to be meted out in the distant future?

The answer to all such questions is relatively simple. Free-will is the real culprit.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden they sinned freely. No matter your particular theory of exactly how, **their sin affects all their offspring**. All evil in the world results from their sin, from mankind being sinners, and from our sins.

God could have prevented sin only at the cost of nullifying human freedom. Had He done so it would have been a creation devoid of love. Since God is love, His creation reflects it. There can be no expression of love without choice and free will.

One theologian put it this way: "A creation in which love is the goal must incorporate risk."

Whenever someone blames God they're not being fair. Or honest. They don't really want God to violate their free-will. They only want Him to violate the free-will of others, or to intervene miraculously according to what they assume is best in a given situation. Blaming God is playing God.

Blaming God is playing God

Jeremiah 23:3-4

3 "But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.

4 I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking," says the Lord.

The phrase "where I have driven them" reminds us that the people were not blameless. They deserved what was coming. We've seen the heinous idolatries they refused to repent of. The nation was about to be overthrown and the people exiled as a discipline from the Lord.

These verses overlook a lot of history - seventy years to be exact. God goes from talking about them being scattered to them being regathered, overlooking the intervening exile in Babylon. The focus was on God's shepherding and on their pasture in the Holy Land.

He was going to raise-up for them good shepherds. We can see ahead to God bringing them back seventy years later and giving them men like Ezra, Nehemiah and Zerubbabel.

He wanted to emphasize that He would continue to shepherd them. He was already preparing for their future return to their "pasture," to Jerusalem and to Israel.

God emphasized His heart for His people - including us. As a Shepherd His desire for us is to be "fruitful and increase," to be fed, to "fear no more, nor be dismayed," and to lack nothing.

Here's our dilemma. As sheep we are hunted by a supernatural roaring lion who is seeking to devour us. Wolves creep in among us. We can find ourselves stripped of this world's goods, persecuted, imprisoned, martyred.

I thought Jesus was our Good Shepherd? He is - even as those things are occurring. In the very midst of them.

We love Psalm twenty-three - the Shepherd psalm. Do you recall it mentions God preparing you a table in the presence of your enemies? Or walking through the valley of the shadow of death? Or anointing your head with oil - which indicates a head wound was being treated?

Christian, you experience the spiritual blessing of being His sheep even and sometimes especially in the midst of peril from your enemies.

We're living in the danger zone. But we are looked after by the Lord, our Good - no, our **Great** - Shepherd. No evil can separate us from His love. He will gather us home one day.

#2 Jesus Is The Shepherd Whose Design Is To Produce Ultimate Pasture

(v5-8)

The Jews would indeed be regathered to their pasture, to the Promised Land, from Babylon. But you may have noted in verse three the Lord spoke of regathering them from "countries," plural. It's a clue that these verses are prophetic and that is exactly what we have before us in verses five through eight.

Jeremiah 23:5

5 "Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord, "That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; A King shall reign and prosper, And execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.

The phrase, "the days are coming," indicate the coming of the Messiah. He would be from the line of David and will rule the entire earth. We know because we have the completed Bible that the Messiah, this King, is Jesus Christ.

One reason we know it's Jesus is because He is called "a Branch of righteousness." There are several places where Messiah is called a "Branch." Scholars note that the occurrences parallel what we learn about Jesus from the Gospels.

- The reference here in verse five portrays the Branch as a King. The Gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus Christ, the Branch, as a King.
- Zechariah 3:8 refers to the Branch as a servant saying, "I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH." The Gospel of Mark portrays Jesus Christ, the Branch, as a servant.
- Zechariah 6:12 says, "And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH..." The Gospel of Luke portrays Jesus Christ, the Branch, as a man.
- Isaiah 4:2 says, "In that day shall the branch of the LORD be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel." Here scholars see a reference to the deity of the Branch because He is referred to as "beautiful and glorious." The Gospel of John portrays Jesus Christ, the Branch, as God.

Jeremiah 23:6

6 In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell safely;
Now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR
RIGHTEOUSNESS.

Notice both Judah *and* Israel "will dwell safely." The nation will be regathered to their pasture, to the Promised Land, and restored as a sovereign nation. Sounds like modern Israel.

Except she is not yet dwelling safely, nor has the Lord returned to rule in "righteousness." This looks to a farther future beyond our own time.

Jeremiah 23:7-8

7 "Therefore, behold, the days are coming," says the Lord, "that they shall no longer say, 'As the Lord lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,'
8 but, 'As the Lord lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel from the north country and from all the countries where I had driven them.' And they shall dwell in their own land."

The final last days regathering of Israel will be from all over the earth. It will be similar to, but greater than, the Exodus from Egypt.

- It will be similar in that God will deliver His chosen nation from their enemies and regather them in their land.
- It will be greater in that it will be a final regathering before Jesus returns to rule the world.

We are looking, in these verses, at the ultimate pasture. As Shepherd of Israel God's design is to bring them into the ultimate pasture of Jerusalem being the capital of the millennial earth.

Again we must confront the reality of the situation the Jews were facing in context, in the time of Jeremiah's prophecies. They had been led astray by their leaders and by their own evil desires. As a result, as a discipline from God, the Babylonians were going to burn Jerusalem and its Temple and exile the survivors for seventy years.

In the very midst of this God declared to them "I'm your Great Shepherd Who will care for you, regather you, and bring you back to your pasture - both soon and ultimately."

He would indeed prepare them a table in the presence of their enemies, walk with them through the valley of the shadow of death, and anoint their wounds with oil.

The world is an evil place. A terrible place, really, because of sin. We want God to be a planetary policeman. We want Him to control the weather so it only benefits us and to restrict natural occurrences like tornados and hurricanes and earthquakes so they never harm us. We want Him to eradicate all diseases or at least make them more discriminating so that no 'good' people or young people are ever affected by them.

God instead says, "I'm your Shepherd. It's my desire to lead you through the present evil world and it's my design to bring you to ultimate pasture."

Why should we follow Him? Because He is also the One Who died on the Cross as "the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world." Your Shepherd laid down His life for you. Then He took it up again in resurrection power to offer you abundant spiritual blessings now and to promise you ultimate pasture later.

Author and pastor Gregory Boyd wrote, "The cross reveals that God's omnipotence is displayed in self-sacrificial love, not sheer might. God conquers sin and the devil not by a sovereign decree but by a wise and humble submission to crucifixion."

Are you wounded? He will anoint you.

Are you surrounded by enemies? He will set a table for you there with His bountiful spiritual blessings.

Walking through the valley of the shadow of death, are you? You need not fear because the Lord is your Shepherd.