

## Beauty for Ashes

*Rev. David Lipsy*

*Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them.*

—Genesis 3:21

1. Man's fall
2. God's judgment
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If you've ever flown on a very stormy day, you will remember the darkness, the wind, the pelting rain. But then, after spending what seems such a long time flying through the thick cloud cover, there's that moment when you burst into the clear blue sky above the clouds where it is calm and full of sun. This illustration can prove helpful when facing difficulties either self-made or those made by others: we may think all is cloud and storm and darkness, but the reality is that the whole time there is, as Calvin once put it, "a calm serenity in heaven," the Holy One arranging all for His glory.

Genesis 3 has been called one of the darkest, if not the darkest, chapter in all of Scripture. But though what was recorded there was awful, it was certainly not altogether dark and foreboding. When Scripture says, "The LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations," that also applies to Genesis 3. Let us look unto the Lord, beloved, in silent prayer, asking that He

might help us see His glory and the hope that is in Christ Jesus, even amidst the tragedy we call the fall of man.

### **Man's fall**

We know that chapter divisions were not in the original Scriptures but were added later in history. So it's quite striking to think that the words "the man and his wife... were not ashamed" appear immediately before, "Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field." There stood the first couple, God's crown jewel of creation. They were perfect, sinless, ideally suited for one another. They were married by the Lord Himself, set in the most beautiful circumstances imaginable, enjoying God's perfect love, His blessed favor, and they could love Him and each other with a sinless, selfless, abounding love. Adam and Eve, literally, did not have a burdensome care in the world. They could look God and each other in the face without shame. They had no sorrow, no pain, no trouble—only joy and peace and glory.

"Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made" (v. 1) The word translated "subtil" has the sense of clever or crafty. The word "serpent" of course carries a double-sense throughout Scripture. It not only refers to a certain kind of reptile, but it is also used to refer to the evil one, the fallen angel, Satan. Here we already have our first lesson, namely, that Satan almost always disguises himself, hiding the true nature of sin from us in order to deceive as many as possible.

"And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" (v. 1). If you listen to the wording, it's as though Satan was insinuating they couldn't have anything. "Shall not eat of every tree...?" Even the first word, "yea," makes us wonder if these words were a continuation of a previous exchange of

words since we don't normally begin a conversation with the word "yes."

"Hath God said?" These words can be interpreted any number of ways. "Hath God said?" as in, "Is that what you remember Him saying?" or perhaps, "He didn't say that, did He?" Either way, this way of speaking is meant to do one thing to Eve—cause her to doubt. Satan wants us to doubt what God says—His meaning, His truthfulness. Satan loves to try to make God look stingy, as if the Lord is actually withholding something good from us, leaving us with what is worse or with nothing at all. So many temptations come to us in the same way, don't they? Has God said you can't have physical relations before marriage? Has God said you can't do anything on the Lord's Day? Has God said you always have to be honest? Thus Satan tries, often successfully, to make the fear of God, a life of holiness, look dreadfully boring, quite lacking in comparison to the ways of sin. Consequently, many try to straddle the fence. They want to be Christians, but they so want a piece of the world's action, too!

We need to examine ourselves carefully in this regard. We are all relatively new to the art of temptation when compared with Satan; he has had six thousand years of practice and experience. Let's not therefore think too highly of our own power to resist or recognize temptation, even when it is sometimes right in front of us!

Satan's words in verse 1 constitute the first attempt in history to bring God into question—His words, His intentions, His character. Eve tried to put things in a better light (vv. 2–3): "And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die." We're not sure if Eve added the words "...neither shall ye touch" to God's original warning, since

Scripture doesn't always tell us all the details involved in a particular history. But we do know one word was added—"lest"—as in "lest ye die." This little word opens a huge door of opportunity for the Evil One. The word "lest," in the underlying Hebrew, introduces the idea of "perhaps." Don't eat of it because you might die. But God's warning was straightforward and unambiguous: "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17).

After sowing doubt, Satan then tells the first outright lie in history. "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). In John 8:44, Jesus refers to the devil as the father of lies. If Satan had said only this much to Eve, she might have been taken aback since this creature was now blatantly contradicting God. But Satan never tells us lies without trying to make them attractive. He adds, "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Let's unpack this.

"For God doth know..." These words insinuate that God purposely withheld knowledge from Adam and Eve, knowledge of the supposed benefits of which Satan would soon speak. "God knew this all along," Satan suggests. How many, ever since, have been tempted to blame God for all kinds of things, simply because the Almighty is omniscient. "If He knew, why didn't He...?"

"In the day ye eat thereof." "You won't have to wait," is the temptation here. "You'll have all the benefits immediately! You don't have to live a long life of obedience. Have it all now!" Satan wants to rush us so we don't think too long about temptation. What will they have, according to the Evil One? "Your eyes shall be opened." "Eyes opened" insinuates that God created them blind. How often doesn't Satan tempt us to explore the forbidden, the unknown, wanting us to poke around in the mystery of iniquity. How many look at those of us who are trying to

live holy lives and think or even say, “You don’t know what you’re missing,” as if a holy life is somehow deficient.

“Ye shall be as gods.” Put in other words, “You can live your own life, set your own rules, do what you want. Serve God? Follow His rules? You’ve got better things to do. Just be free of all that. Be independent. Why serve when you can rule? You don’t need all this church stuff. Church people are strange anyway. Normal people don’t live this way—rules and more rules. Just head out on your own, be your own boss. So maybe you’ll upset some people at first, but they’ll get used to it. They’ll have to eventually.” The temptation to be autonomous is very powerful and particularly so in the culture in which we live.

“Knowing good and evil.” Here again, the temptation is, “There’s a whole world out there that you don’t know about. Just take a peek. See what you’re missing, what ‘everybody else’ is talking about or doing or seeing,” as if there is something really great about knowing evil! So the illicit relationship, which began with flirting at first perhaps; or just a quick peek at the dark side of the Internet; or the parties—you just wanted to see what they’re like, etc. Satan suggests that God knows all about this and is keeping it from us. “Don’t be too serious. Adopt a little religion to get by, to keep the right people at a distance. But look at all that you can’t do if you’re a serious Christian—the places you can’t go, the kind of girlfriend/boyfriend you can’t have.” He would have us think of God as stingy, as withholding what would really make us happy. He wants us to think that following God is just a negative kind of life. He wants us to think God’s ways equal a life wasted, that the world and sin will get us where we want to be.

Finally, Satan uses the most powerful weapon of all—silence. He puts the temptation right there, in front of our eyes, inside our ears, before our mind—and lets it just sit

there, working on us. And sure enough, instead of being repulsed, Eve toys with the temptation instead. Note carefully the steps that turned temptation into sin, into the fall. “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food...” (3:6). She’s not going to take it just yet; but she’ll just look at it, just to see.” The Evil One loves to tempt us with, “No, you’re not going to dive into that wickedness—just take a peek, dabble a little, a minute or two—that’s all.” So we can become accustomed to toying with temptation in our minds. We convince ourselves that’s no big deal. But we tend to forget that this feeds and draws in our heart through our desires. As James later writes, “When lust [desire] hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (1:15). So we simply cannot play with temptation—not even a hint of it. We tend to think we’re much stronger than we actually are.

“And that it was pleasant to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6). How much sin passes under the guise of art or culture or aesthetics! There is much beauty in creation, but some of it was meant to be reserved and to be enjoyed in God’s way and in God’s time. Too often we are drawn in by what is pleasant to the eyes, even as a fish is drawn in by the attractive lure, one that hides the deadly hook from view.

“And a tree to be desired to make one wise” (v. 6). That was the clincher. They had plenty of food, plenty of beauty all around them, but this? It appears Eve had little apprehension of the tremendous wisdom with which God created Adam and her. What is wisdom? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of it, and to walk in His ways is the furtherance of it. Wisdom is a godly application of what one knows to any given situation. For Eve to disobey the Lord would be the very opposite of wisdom. James describes such wisdom this way: “This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish” (James 3:15). Did you ever feel as if the world is turning

upside-down in this respect? Evil is good and good is evil. It's only the unenlightened, the simpleton, that believes in God; the truly wise are too sophisticated to be associated with such things. But let's be honest with ourselves. Apart from God's grace, we too will be embarrassed to stand out as a thoroughgoing Christian, someone totally committed to God and His ways.

"She took of the fruit thereof and did eat." It was done. Satan couldn't be happier. He hadn't been able to successfully rebel against God in heaven, so he tried the next worse thing—to destroy God's image bearer. Knowing the judgment he received for rebelling, he probably thought the same would happen to Eve: no mercy forever.

As the saying goes, "Misery loves company." Not content to rebel against God herself, her mind now alienated from Him, Eve gives to her husband, apparently without explanation or excuse: "and gave also unto her husband with her and he did eat" (Gen. 3:6). Did "with her" mean Adam was there all along? Or does it simply mean she gave of the same tree for him to eat as she had? Some "help meet" Eve was, plunging her husband and progeny into ruin! Some "head" Adam was, breaking covenant with God!

So there it was. I could only wish we could really see in this deed all the ugliness, all the wretchedness, all the sinfulness that it really was. We lost it all, beloved. We lost our God. We lost our innocence. We lost our dignity. We lost our lives. We died spiritually, we began dying physically, we were torn asunder relationally, and we ruined the creation through the curse we earned. God would have been just to end it all right there. The ingratitude! The arrogance! The pride! He had given them far more than we could ever imagine, and they trampled upon it all, casting Him aside.

### **God's Judgment**

You may think, perhaps, that we spent a great deal of time during this message on the fall. Is it really necessary to sludge through all that again and again? There is certainly no pleasure in doing so; but it really has to be done. With sin becoming more open, public, blatant, and pervasive, with temptations literally everywhere, we really need, by God's grace, to see sin in the ugliest light possible because it offends Him deeply and is the cause of literally every single wretched occurrence that ever happened on earth. War, sickness, hatred, poverty, disease, disasters—we did this! Sin did this! God is deadly serious when He tells us the friendship of the world is enmity with Him (James 4:4) and that we cannot love God and mammon (Matt. 6:24).

Adam and Eve's eyes were opened all right (v. 7), and what they saw horrified them. First, they were ashamed, ashamed that they had no covering. Did their appearance change so that they needed clothes to cover it? No, it wasn't their appearance; it was their mind and soul that became ugly in their eyes and needed a covering. Guilt entered into the world and shame followed on its heels. Isn't this scene re-enacted over and over in our own lives? We try to cover sin, suppress guilt, hide the dark side of us. If we're so sure of ourselves and our sins, why do we hide? This thought leads to one of the reasons Christians will be persecuted here in our land. Our voice, our lifestyle, our testimony, as a noteworthy Christian apologist recently pointed out, still stings the conscience of people who are trying to suppress any sense of guilt due to sin.

Adam and Eve do two things. They try to hide and they try to cover themselves. Instead of delighting in the presence of God, they fled from it. How do we feel about being in church? Praying? Hearing or reading God's Word? Is it our delight or can we not wait till it's over? Adam and Eve would have thought themselves happy if

they never saw or heard from God again. Think about that! Is that me? Is it you?

But then we have verse 9, one of the most remarkable verses in Scripture: “And the LORD God called unto Adam and said unto him, Where art thou?” How remarkable! God didn’t lose Adam; Adam lost God in exchange for sin. But instead of Adam seeking God, and repenting before Him, he ran away. But here in verse 9 we have the beginning of the gospel of God’s mercy. God sought Adam and Eve; He called them out of their hiding place. Yes, He would chasten them—severely, in fact—but not to destroy them. God could have done that in an instant if He wanted to.

Has God ever said to you, “Where art thou?” How about right now? We’re not talking about an audible voice or vision. But have you ever come to a point in your life where you knew God was closing in on you, as it were, showing you in no uncertain terms that He was calling you out of the darkness, summoning you to Himself? Beloved, we can run from God, but we cannot hide. Adam presented a poor excuse for hiding, an excuse that actually condemned him, for why would he now be ashamed and afraid? Here we see how hopeless a case man is apart from grace! When God asks Adam point blank if he ate of the tree, Adam tries to shift the blame to Eve and, indirectly, to the Lord Himself for giving Eve to him in the first place. “The woman, whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat” (v. 12). Pathetic, isn’t it? “It’s really Thy fault and hers!” And aren’t we also sometimes prone to blame God when things go wrong in our lives? After all, He could have prevented it, right? What is man!

But it goes no better when God questions Eve as to what she did: “And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me and I did eat” (v. 13). “It wasn’t my fault. I wouldn’t be

in this mess if it wasn't for that snake." She might as well have added, "The serpent Thou didst make!"

Repentance can't be found in either one of our first parents. In themselves, they were truly hopeless, hapless, hardened sinners—just like those of you who are reading this message. Some of you might think that it's God's fault for not converting you. Or it's God's fault for leading you to your lousy job. It was His idea that I marry this good-for-nothing spouse. If others only knew my situation, they would know it's not my fault—none of it! Well, maybe a little bit is my fault, just as Adam and Eve tacked on the briefest of confessions at the end of their replies.

God doesn't ask the serpent what he had done. Did you ever wonder why not? God was not giving Satan any opportunity to repent, no opportunity to confess. He was done: "Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life" (v. 14). That was for the snake for allowing himself to be so used of Satan. But the next words are for Satan himself and far more astonishing.

### **Gospel Mercy**

"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (v. 15). There is no time limit on this promise. It started then and it will end on the Judgment Day; God started a war that will rage till the end of time. It will be His children against Satan's followers. That battle still rages—in our homes, in shops and schools—everywhere. Satan tries his worst to overthrow the church and yet God preserves her. And so Satan with all his willing followers cannot stand against the onslaught of the Son of God through His Spirit, His Word, and His grace. The gates of hell shall not prevail against

His church (Matt. 16:18). The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty, through God, to the pulling down of strongholds (2 Cor. 10:4). Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Yes, Adam and Eve would face grave punishments due to sin. The woman's sorrow would be multiplied, as would the pain associated with childbirth, as if to remind every woman with every birth that it was a woman who ushered sin into the world. When God said to Eve that her husband would rule over her, we recall that she was already given to him as a help meet for him. So it's no punishment for her or anyone to be under authority, for man was under God's authority prior to the fall. Instead, the chastisement was that Eve was now subject to a sinful husband. It may sound a little harsh coming from a man, but every time a man in authority acts harshly or ungodly, he will be judged by God for that, but the roots of his being so can be traced to Eve. She led her formerly perfect husband to ruin and now had to live under his sin-affected authority as does every other woman under male headship.

What was Adam's chastening? Perhaps we seldom think about all God says in verse 17: "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it..." Of course, God was not saying husbands don't have to listen to their wives. However, He was saying that men must not follow their wife's advice when it would be sinful to do so. In this instance, Adam didn't lead Eve but was led by her into sin. Had he been the man he should have been, he would have corrected her. The feminist movement might not have had the effect it did on Western culture had it not been for so many men not taking the lead, especially spiritually, in the manner God would have them, or if they hadn't abused their God-given authority in ungodly ways. What a temptation for women to step

into the vacuum men create through neglect, or step out in rebellion when oppressed by ungodly abuse of authority. These are explanations, not excuses, for women who sin by casting off the rightful authority of their husbands, fathers, or other lawful authorities.

“Cursed is the ground” (v. 17). Our days really are labor and sorrow; we work very hard to gain anything from a now-grudging earth. Instead of joyfully gathering the delectable fruit of Paradise, thorns and thistles now greet us in our gardens and fields. We never have to try to produce weeds. And every weed that challenges our produce is a reminder that we’ve made life difficult for ourselves, whether we are farmers or occupy a different calling. Man will have to work until he drops back dead into the ground from which he was originally created.

So what did Adam and Eve do in the face of these chastenings? Repent? No. By nature our attitude is, “We’ll beat this! We’ll invent gadgets to save us work, herbicides to rid us of the weeds, invent an extra day off per week and call them weekends or extend them further and call them holidays or vacations. We’ll retire. We’ll pursue medical advances to stave off death, live longer and longer, and hopefully find a cure for death itself!” Of course, this is not to say that those things are sinful rebellion. However, could we not safely say that if we spent a fraction of the effort seeking peace with God, repenting of sin, striving to enter in at the strait gate, and living holy lives to the glory of God, we’d be far ahead of where mankind is today despite our cleverness? This is what the fall did to us, what we did to ourselves: blindness! So ever since that day, unregenerate people spend their whole career and their whole lives trying to limit the symptoms of the fall rather than addressing the root of it. How can we make ourselves less dependent on God rather than more dependent?

But this is why the conclusion of this chapter is such a wonder. God knew we would never be able to fix the problem, never even be able to want to address the root cause of the problem, but instead only complain about and labor to reverse the consequences of our sin and fall. He allowed our sin to wreak such havoc upon life that we would be led to realize, by His grace, that our fixing is hopeless and that He is our only hope. Thus the “beauty for ashes” title of this message. We burned down the house of our happiness around ourselves, and out of those ashes God built the stately palace of the gospel, the King of which is neither Adam nor Eve, but Jesus Christ the Lord. All who enter into that city of refuge are safe, not just for twenty or thirty years, but forever—saved in this life and safe in eternity.

One of the most pitiful sights in all the world is to see a grown man or woman or a child, sitting among the ashes thinking himself happy, the castle door within a step or two of their ash heap! The gospel is not about us finding God, beloved. It’s about Him awakening us to the reality that we’ve lost Him, but then drawing us to Himself through Jesus Christ in mercy. Beauty for ashes. The first Adam failed us miserably, and we’ve added to his folly. But the second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, failed not. All who put their trust in Him, rather than themselves, will come to experience that all the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth indeed (Ps. 25:10).

Verse 21 says, “Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them.” God made the coats. He clothed them Himself. These coats came by way of sacrifice, an innocent animal having died to provide the only covering for Adam and Eve’s shame that He could accept. You can almost see the Lord, as it were, draping the clothes over them. “Here. Put these on. I made them for you.” Yes, He sent them out into the cold

cruel world their sin had made; but He didn't send them destitute of hope.

Let us take one last lingering look at Paradise. The blessed place God had planted and from which Adam and Eve were now driven, and to which they would never return? No, not that Paradise. The covering God gave them and the promise He gave them would, if embraced by faith, bring them to a Paradise unlike anything they had ever seen or known. It brings sinners to heaven itself and to the new heavens and new earth. So it will be for any and all who give up trying to create their own version of Paradise and who, by God's grace, start seeking a city that has foundations, everlasting foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Paradise was lost. But through Jesus Christ, God's Son, Paradise is gained forever. Forever with the Lord, forever without sin, sorrow and sighing forever flown away, tears wiped from all eyes forever, eternal security in the eternal Son of God—this is the beauty God gives in place of the ashes of the fall, the ashes of our sin-ravaged lives in a fallen world. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." To God be the glory, now and forever, amen.

## The Shepherd's Gift of Rest

*Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.*

—Psalm 23:2a

A flock of sheep feeding and resting in rich, green pastures by a cooling stream is a pleasing sight in any country. But green pastures are a rare feast for sheep in Israel. Not only are the sheep grazed in the wilderness instead of cultivated fields, but lack of rain allows for verdant grass only two or three months a year.<sup>1</sup> Such a pastoral scene understandably becomes a vivid symbol of spiritual rest and contentment, and David used this symbol in saying: the Lord “maketh me to lie down in green pastures.”

Some people are quick to interpret the blessings of Psalm 23 as natural benefits. We will not deny, of course, that everyone needs physical rest. There must be pauses and parentheses in every life, for our hand cannot always be laboring, nor our brain always given to intense thought. Pleasure and relaxation are a part of enjoying God's good gifts. But if we apply the Shepherd's benefits of Psalm 23 only in a natural way, we soon forget the spiritual benefits enjoyed by God's people in addressing their deepest spiritual needs.

Due to our fall in Adam, we lost God and His image as well as true, spiritual rest. Augustine rightly said, “Thou

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1. Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 40.

hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee.”<sup>2</sup> To fill the void within, we grasp for the world’s promises of satisfaction. Even though the world around us and within us is but a land of deserts, we still pursue its elusive promise of rest. We live as if we were the first persons in the history of mankind to find true contentment apart from our Creator. “The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt” (Isa. 57:20).

Today’s generation is living proof of this truth in its restlessness, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness. Millions immerse themselves in senseless forms of entertainment. Millions more grasp illegal drugs, alcohol, and prescription medications to try to lift their moods. Flashing advertisements constantly promise peace, popularity, and happiness for a price. Our society is one mass of restless people, continually returning empty-handed from selfish pursuits.

True rest is to be found by grace in God alone. There is true rest only in the Jehovah-Shepherd. This rest is reserved only for His people and is granted only by sovereign grace. This rest makes a lost sheep willing to follow the Shepherd in the day of divine power, for He alone can lead to rest. The Lord “maketh me to lie down in green pastures.”

### **The Shepherd Provides the Conditions for Rest**

It would seem easy to get a sheep to lie down and rest. A shepherd, however, knows better. Kenneth Bailey writes, “A dog can be trained to sit and lie down. Not so a sheep.”<sup>3</sup> Sheep will only rest when certain conditions have been met. Just as an earthly shepherd will labor diligently to

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2. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1886), 1:45.

3. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd*, 39–40.

provide the necessary conditions to grant his sheep natural rest, so the heavenly Shepherd will labor to provide the necessary conditions for His flock's spiritual rest.

### *The Rest of Safety*

Freedom from fear and a sense of safety is something a shepherd must provide his flock for them to feel free to lie down and rest. Phillip Keller writes, "Sheep are so timid and easily panicked that even a stray jackrabbit suddenly bounding from behind a bush can stampede a whole flock. When one startled sheep runs in flight a dozen others will bolt with it in blind fear, not waiting to see what frightened them."<sup>4</sup>

Sheep need a sense of security in order to rest. Keller explains, "As long as there is even the slightest suspicion of danger from dogs, coyotes, cougars, bears or other enemies the sheep stand up ready to flee for their lives. They have little or no means of self-defense. They are helpless, timid, feeble creatures whose only recourse is to run."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a single predator can kill several, even dozens, of sheep in one night.

How does a shepherd quiet his flock's fears so that they may lie down and rest? Certainly, he seeks to remove as many causes of their fear as he possibly can. Yet nothing brings more of a sense of safety to the flock than the presence of the shepherd himself. Simply seeing him in their midst puts their fears to rest.

Such is also the condition of Jesus Christ's spiritual flock. Due to their helplessness and vulnerability, they are a timid flock with many things to fear. When the Lord begins His saving work in their souls, they learn

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4. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 36.

5. Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, 36.

that they have no strength in themselves to fight against spiritual predators.

First, they come to fear *sin*. Their guilt, penalty, power, pollution, and results press upon their consciences. They also fear the *law*. Its demand for perfection allows them no rest, but drives them like an Egyptian slave-master to make bricks without straw. They also fear *Satan*. Where can they find rest when they are continually confronted with this roaring lion's fearful attacks of temptation and accusation? And, they fear *death and judgment*. How can they rest if their everlasting destiny lies in the balance and is found wanting?

Only the presence of their Shepherd can dispel these fears. His blood has brought reconciliation and peace in the midst of all that threatens them (Col. 1:20). His presence makes them calm as the Shepherd stands with them and leads them in the strength of the Lord. He is their peace (Mic. 5:4-5). The Lord Jesus said, "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you" (John 14:18). Literally, His promise is, "I will not leave you *orphans*." By the indwelling Spirit (v. 16), Christ and the Father dwell in the believer, are always present (v. 20), and are "a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1).

The Shepherd stands by His flock and grants them the faith to behold Him and to believe that He is looking on them in His favor. They are thus free to lay all their fears at His feet and to place all their trust and confidence in Him as the Great Shepherd. By protecting the sheep from the things they fear, but especially by staying close to them and enabling them to behold His presence, Jehovah-Shepherd provides His flock with the first condition necessary to make room for spiritual rest.

*The Rest of Harmony*

Sheep must also be at peace with one another to rest. Keller writes, "The second source of fear from which the sheepman delivers his sheep is that of tension, rivalry, and cruel competition within the flock itself."<sup>6</sup> Like other animals, sheep fight among themselves, creating strife and tension within the flock. The stronger attack the weaker and claim the best pasture for themselves. As a result, the flock cannot lie down and rest.

Is it any different with Christ's flock spiritually? Did you ever find one of God's children at rest spiritually while striving to be "top sheep"? Do not the head butting and shoving among God's children sometimes cause so much disorder that the entire congregation becomes edgy and tense? Paul's advice in Philippians 2:3 is needed among believers today: "In lowliness of mind let each esteem [the] other better than themselves."

The Good Shepherd responds to fighting in the flock in justice, wisdom, and love. He disciplines the strong for pushing around the weaker sheep. In Ezekiel 34:21–22, He says, "Because ye have thrust with side and with shoulder, and pushed all the diseased with your horns, till ye have scattered them abroad; therefore will I save my flock, and they shall no more be a prey."

The Shepherd also makes known His presence in the flock as Lord and Son of David. Ezekiel 34:23–24 says, "And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd. And I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David a prince among them; I the LORD have spoken it." Just as the presence of the shepherd often causes sheep to stop fighting, so the presence

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6. Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, 39.

of the Lord silences bickering and promotes humility and peace among all who are truly His.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the Good Shepherd shows special compassion for the weaker sheep. Isaiah 40:11 says, “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.” The Shepherd shows His sheep that the greatest advantages come not from striving to dominate others but from being the servant of all. “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (James 4:6).

Then, instead of a *butting order* the sheep respond with a *bowing order*. The Lord’s sheep cannot come low enough. Are you seeking grace to become one of the lowliest sheep of God? Have you learned that the closer you are to the bottom the closer you are to the Shepherd? Let this be your prayer: “Lord, give me grace to come down, for I cannot bring myself there. Make room for spiritual rest by bringing me before Thee as one of the lowest sheep. I am glad to rest there, if only I may be of *Thy* flock.”

### *The Rest of Tranquility*

A third thing that prevents sheep from lying down to rest is the painful bite of insects. Keller writes, “Sheep, especially in the summer, can be driven to absolute distraction by nasal flies, bot flies, warble flies and ticks. When tormented by these pests it is literally impossible for them to lie down and rest. Instead they are up and on their feet, stamping their legs, shaking their heads, ready to rush off into the bush for relief from the pests.”<sup>8</sup> The shepherd

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7. Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, 40, 42.

8. Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, 43.

must help ward off these insects by applying oil to the sheep's head.<sup>9</sup>

Jehovah's sheep are also preyed on by pests that prevent spiritual rest. Although true believers strive against worldliness, the world often comes back to live within them, much to their annoyance. It encroaches upon their souls through many disguises. Like Lot, the sheep can become entangled with the world even as its filth vexes their righteous souls (2 Peter 2:7). Various temptations can be such spiritual pests that the sheep cannot lie down to rest. Some of God's sheep struggle with doubts concerning doctrinal truths, while others battle the temptation of a particular sin or fear that they will one day commit a gross sin. The greatest pest, however, is *self*. Like the apostle Paul God's sheep often discover that "what I hate, that do I," so that they cry out, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me?" (Rom. 7:15, 24).

The divine Shepherd provides something far better than insect repellent for relief from tormentors. He dips His flock in *the oil of the Spirit*, who cleanses, sanctifies, heals, comforts, and transforms the flock, working faith in their souls and uniting them to the Great Shepherd. Christ shares with His sheep the oil of gladness and joy that God has poured out on Him through the Spirit (Ps. 45:7; Isa. 61:1–3). The Spirit's work gives them relief, especially when He takes the things of Christ and shows them to the flock (John 16:13–14). That allows them by faith to place their feet on the neck of the world, on temptations, and even on self. In this way too, the way is opened to true spiritual rest.

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9. Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, 116.

*The Rest of Sufficiency*

Finally, hungry sheep will not lie down to rest. Keller writes, “A hungry, ill-fed sheep is ever on its feet, on the move, searching for another scanty mouthful of forage to try and satisfy its gnawing hunger. Such sheep are not contented, they do not thrive.”<sup>10</sup> Only when sheep have sufficient food to fill their hungry bellies can they lie down to rest.

Given the semi-arid climate of Israel, it is challenging for a shepherd to find good pasture for his flock. It demands careful forethought and constant effort. Bailey recounts how he was near the summit of Jabal Sannin (elev. 8,600 ft.) in Lebanon, where, he says, “I had an interesting conversation with an experienced shepherd (with his large flock) who described to me in fascinating detail the various options and the numerous decisions he was obliged to make each day as he sought forage and water for his more than one hundred sheep.”<sup>11</sup>

The Good Shepherd leads His sheep to good pasture. He is the door through which they enter into salvation and go out to find the pasture of life, even abundant life (John 10:1–11). Jesus Christ is Himself the pasture of His people, for He is *the living Word of God*. To provide that cost Him more than planning and hard labor—it cost Him the bloody sweat of crucifixion and death. He is the pasture land of eternal satisfaction for His own. As the true meat and drink of life eternal, Christ feeds and nourishes hungry and thirsty souls with His crucified body and shed blood. His sheep find in Him everything they need for time and eternity. He is the Bread of Life (John 6:35). He is the Father’s house in which there is bread enough and

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10. Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, 46.

11. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd*, 41.

to spare. He is the focus, the centerpiece, the delight, and the all-in-all of His flock.

He also gives *the written Word of God* as pasture for His flock. The living Word (Christ) and the written Word (the Bible) are inseparably associated with each other. Christ is the great message of all the Holy Scriptures (Luke 24:27, 44; Acts 3:18, 21; 2 Tim. 3:14–16). The Scriptures reveal Jesus Christ as the righteousness of sinners and the Lord and Savior of all who call on His name (Rom. 1:16–17; 10:12–15).

God's people love Scripture and honor it as the Word of God (Ps. 119:97) for it is their life, their food, their pasture. It is their bread when they are hungry (Isa. 55:1–3, 10), their honey when they are faint (Ps. 19:10), their milk when they are babes (1 Cor. 3:2), and their strong meat when they are men (Heb. 5:12–14). They are brought by faith and through grace to "receive with meekness the engrafted word" (James 1:21), to keep this Word (John 17:6), and to continue in this Word (John 8:31).

God's house becomes their home where they feed in the green pastures of the Word of God with its ordinances for the worship of God. In the Old Testament, God gave Himself to His people in His special presence in the temple, though He also heard every prayer whispered in the Israelites' private homes. Psalm 87:2–3 says, "The LORD loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God." In the New Testament, Christ indwelt every believer by the Holy Spirit, but promised His special presence whenever the church gathers in His name (Matt. 18:20). In the congregation, the sheep hear their Shepherd's voice speaking to them through the reading and the preaching of the Word.

In addition to the Holy Spirit, the ministry of the Word is the principal benefit or gift of the Great Shepherd's

ascension (Eph. 4:10–11). It is a standing pledge to the church that Christ is now “in the presence of God for us” (Heb. 9:24). Therefore it pleases Him to put special honor upon the preaching of “Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23, 24). Oh, what a blessing it is to find rest for the soul in God’s preached Word! In the house of God, Jehovah’s flock meets their God and shepherding King. There Christ rests and dwells, “for the LORD hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation.” He promises to “abundantly bless her provision” and to “satisfy her poor with bread...and her saints shall shout aloud for joy” (Ps. 132:13, 15, 16).

There, like sheep lying down in green pastures, the Lord’s flock experiences divine rest. There the Shepherd provides spiritual *safety* from the predatory fears of sin, Satan, death, and judgment. He gives them spiritual *harmony* with one another so that they dwell together in humility and peace. He blesses them with spiritual *tranquility* as the oil of the Spirit soothes the pricking irritations of temptation and self. He feeds them with the spiritual *sufficiency* of His own fullness offered in His Word, the Holy Scriptures. Have you experienced this rest?

Arise, O Lord, our God, arise  
 And enter now into Thy rest  
 O let this house be Thy abode,  
 Forever with Thy presence blest.

I will abundantly provide  
 For Zion’s good, the Lord hath said;  
 I will supply her daily need  
 And satisfy her poor with bread.

Salvation shall adorn her priests,  
Her saints shall shout with joy divine,  
Messiah's pow'r shall be revealed,  
His glory in His Church shall shine.<sup>12</sup>

### **Enjoying Divine Rest by Faith**

Jesus Christ is not only the Redeemer who purchases salvation for His flock, but He is also the King who applies that salvation to His flock. "He maketh me to lie down," David says. Jehovah provides salvation based on Christ's objective work of grace for His sheep. However, the Shepherd also works subjectively in His sheep, and this work appears in their experience and activity. *God* did the work, but *David* had to lie down.

Likewise, we must experience not only how the Lord provides the four conditions necessary for spiritual rest, but also the application of true rest to our souls. If we are one of Jehovah's sheep, the divine means that are instrumental to embrace spiritual rest must be exercised within our souls, enabling us to confess, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." This is the exercise of true, saving faith.

True faith is *of* the Lord and its only object *is* the Lord. Faith is essential for every aspect of spiritual life. It is the captain of all spiritual graces. George Swinnock (1627–1673) wrote, "Call forth that commander-in-chief; and then the private soldiers, the other graces, will all follow."<sup>13</sup> Christ honors faith the most, because faith honors Christ the most. Faith focuses upon Christ, believes in Him, trusts Him, and leans upon Him. True faith lies down in the finished work of Christ, confessing by its very

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12. *The Psalter*, no. 368 [Ps. 132].

13. George Swinnock, *The Christian Man's Calling*, in *The Works of George Swinnock* (1868; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 1:202.

exercise both self-deficiency and divine sufficiency. Oh, for grace to *abide* in the pastures of the living and written Word by faith!

In the exercise of faith the Holy Spirit offers to meet all the needs of His people in the Lamb of God, applying to them the written Word of God so that they are enabled to rest in the living Word. Through faith, they come to see that Christ is the answer to all the problems that burden their souls.

Are they *sinner*s? Christ became sin for His people to redeem them from it (2 Cor. 5:21).

Are they *law-breakers*? Christ is the law-keeper (Matt. 5:17).

Are they *separated from God*? Christ was forsaken of His Father as Judge so that they might never be forsaken of Him (Matt. 27:46).

Are they *unrighteous*? Christ is the all-righteous One, having a perfect robe of righteousness through His active and passive obedience to the will of God (Isa. 61:10).

Are they *cursed*? Christ died the accursed death as curse-bearer of His elect (Gal. 3:13).

Are they under divine *wrath*? Christ is the peacemaker (Isa. 53:5).

Are they *enemies of God*? In Christ “mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Ps. 85:10).

Are they *foolish*? Christ is wisdom (Prov. 8).

Are they *filthy*? Christ is “holy, harmless, undefiled” (Heb. 7:26).

Are they *tempted*? Christ was “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

Are they spiritually *poor*? Christ, who was rich, became poor so that through His poverty they might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

Are they in spiritual *bondage*? In Christ there is liberty, for "if the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Are they *weak*? Christ is their strength (1 Sam. 15:29).

Are they *in need of prayer*? Christ is the praying High Priest, sitting at the right hand of the Father, who never ceases to make intercession for His people (Rom. 8:34).

Are they *restless*? Christ, who by Himself purged our sins, is now sitting on His throne of rest, causing His people to rest in Him as the Priest who has paid everything, as the Prophet who teaches everything they need to learn, and as the King who rules over everything on their behalf.

There is no end to it. The green pastures of God's living and written Word can never become parched or overgrazed as long as we receive this Word in faith. The Word of God reveals Christ's person, natures, states, and offices as a medicine cabinet out of which the Holy Spirit administers healing for every disease that may afflict Jehovah's sheep.

By teaching that faith is the instrument through which God provides these rich spiritual blessings for His flock, we do not imply that the life of faith is easy or can have everything it desires. Far from it, for true faith can only receive what God gives. Faith does not labor to deserve anything from God. Faith is only the hand by which we receive God's gift in Jesus Christ. Christ's merit alone saves sinners.

Ever since the fall of mankind, we have fought to be our own shepherds, to find our own rest, and to be our own Lord. God's grace breaks this stubborn pride, making us dependent upon Him. Only then can we find true rest. By faith, we come to Christ and learn the reality of His promise: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye

shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28–30).

The Holy Spirit works this rest in the souls of God’s people. This rest increases in God and decreases in self-righteousness, self-reliance, and self-idolatry. It is spiritual rest, not a rest dependent on earthly circumstances or goods. As Luther said, the Spirit gives the believer “spiritual eyes” so that he knows “what is the best and noblest thing on earth,” not visible splendor, power, and wealth, but “that the Lord is his Shepherd and that he is in His pasture and in His care, that is, that he has God’s Word.”<sup>14</sup> This rest leads them to sing in hope,

Thou wilt stretch forth Thy mighty arm  
To save me when my foes alarm;  
The work Thou hast for me begun  
Shall by Thy grace be fully done;  
Forever mercy dwells with Thee;  
O Lord, my Maker, think on me.<sup>15</sup>

As the faith of God’s people increases, it flowers and bears fruit in full assurance of faith. The Spirit applies the work of Christ deeply to the conscience. There is a difference between justification by faith, and the assurance of grace and salvation.<sup>16</sup> The first is an objective reality for all believers; the latter is a rich privilege which we must seek in growing experience.

United to Christ, believers can say with Asa even in days of conflict, “Help us, O LORD our God; for we rest on thee” (2 Chron. 14:11). Yet this rest can attain greater stability and personal application. It has been said, “The

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14. Luther, “Psalm 23,” in *Luther’s Works*, 12:161.

15. *The Psalter*, no. 381 [Ps. 138].

16. Cf. Westminster Confession, 11.4 and 18.2–4.

heart of religion lies in its personal pronouns.”<sup>17</sup> God's sheep thus learn to say, “I know whom *I* have believed” (2 Tim. 1:12); “*My* redeemer liveth” (Job 19:25); “I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*” (Gal. 2:20).

Spiritual rest in God becomes the flock's rich possession only as a fruit of justification. “Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). The guilt of sin is removed in its condemning power. The law of God no longer curses us with its impossible demand for perfection, for Christ has fulfilled its precepts and carried its curse (Gal. 3:13; 4:4). Conscience, once accusing, now rests quietly in Christ. “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

In Christ, God becomes a glorious resting ground instead of a cause for terror. Has God's *justice* become your strong fortress, knowing that Christ satisfied justice for you? Do you rest in God's *eternal truthfulness*, praying, “Fulfill this word unto Thy servant upon which Thou hast caused me to hope; O Lord, do as Thou hast said”? Are you conscious of your sin and are you being led to rest in the *mercy* of God which alone can blot it out? Burdened with guilt, have you found a resting place in sovereign, divine *grace*? Overwhelmed with affliction, have you been brought to rest in the *omnipotence* of Jehovah? Bound up with your own foolishness, do you rest in the *wisdom* of God? Has the Lord enabled you to rest in His *immutability* as a sure anchor in the troubled sea of life? Despite your unfaithfulness, are you resting in God's *faithfulness* whose promise is as good as His fulfillment?

The gospel gives us rest from our enemies. Satan's accusing head is crushed in Christ. The believer receives

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17. The saying is attributed to Martin Luther.

courage in Christ as his crucified, exalted King to resist the devil and put him to flight. Having died with Christ and raised with Him, the Christian finds some rest even from self; the old nature can no longer have the upper hand, though the conflict continues until death.

At peace with God and in victory over his enemies, the redeemed sinner gains new strength to submit to the will of God, praying, "Thy will be done." Whatever the Lord does is best. The assured Christian wants to do God's will because it is *His* will. This gives believers great liberty in prayer. The Lord does not hesitate to hand them the keys of the storehouse of divine grace, saying to them what He did to the Canaanite woman: "O woman, great is thy faith; be it unto thee even as thou wilt" (Matt. 15:28). Indeed, they may then experience more rest in the furnace of affliction than with the king in his palace (Dan. 3:24), knowing that "many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivereth him out of them all" (Ps. 34:19). They learn the secrets of Psalm 37:7, "Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him."

All the lions that once terrified them are chained. They see Jesus holding the keys to death and hell (Rev. 1:18). They commit themselves to His hands for time and eternity. Sin itself is defeated and has lost its power to dominate them.

Oh, blessed is the rest that a sinner experiences in salvation! Secure in the possession of everlasting good, he may say, "'Return unto thy rest, O my soul, for the LORD hath dealt bountifully with thee' (Ps. 116:7). He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. Till the pastures of God wither and the river of life fails, my soul cannot lack anything, for the LORD is my Shepherd." This is a blessed foretaste of heaven.

### **Resting in the Love of the Triune God**

The exercise of faith in Christ brings God's sheep to "boldness and access of confidence" (Eph. 3:12) to the triune God. After describing the peace-making work of Christ, Paul writes, "For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (Eph. 2:18). There is an experiential resting in God by coming to know Him personally in His three divine persons. Paul desired this blessing for all believers: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14). Augustine taught that the Trinity is the true object of our enjoyment beyond anything that this world can offer.<sup>18</sup> By grace, we come to know the love and grace of each divine person, and in return our love and joy overflow.

The child of God has the privilege of knowing the Second Person of the Holy Trinity as his Elder Brother (Rom. 8:29), as a merciful and faithful High Priest (Heb. 4:15–16), and as his advocate with the Father (1 John 2:1). The believer can become personally acquainted with Immanuel Himself. He can know Christ as "a friend that sticketh closer than a brother" (Prov. 18:24). Christ's gifts and benefits are wonderful, but His person is "altogether lovely" (Song of Sol. 5:16). Blessed are they who cannot only say, "He gave me peace," but also "He is my peace." This conviction strengthened the early Christians as they faced martyrdom; they inscribed on the walls of the catacombs, "In Christ, in peace."

What a wonder it is to be admitted into the circle of Christ's personal friends! He brings us to rest in Himself with the very rest which He enjoys with His Father. He

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18. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw, 1.5, in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*, ed. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1892), 9:10.

rests in grateful submission in the Father's sovereign decree of electing love. He rests in the blessed contemplation of all that is delivered unto Him by the Father as the fruit of His work as Mediator. He rests in the completion of His work that the Father gave Him to do in this world (Heb. 4:10). He rests in the full knowledge that He has of the Father and the Father of Him, and in the incomprehensible love between them. He rests in the very heart of His Father as the only-begotten Son (John 1:18). As we come to know Him better, we increasingly rest in His rest.

To know the Son is also to know the Father (John 14:9). Christ brings His friends and brothers to know the First Person of the Holy Trinity. He opens up for them the experiential enjoyment of their adoption into the household of God. The Father makes their adoption real by the Spirit of the Son, who witnesses with their spirits that they are children of God, leading them to cry out, "Abba, Father!" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Through the last Adam, the Father restores the relationship they lost in the first Adam. Justification removes condemnation from a sinner and places him in a status of righteousness in God's courtroom. However, adoption goes further; it brings him to the table of God's household as one of His dear children.

Blessed are the prodigals who experience not only repentance and confession but are also received into the arms of a loving Father. In mercy the Father sees them a great way off, has compassion on them, runs to them, embraces them, and kisses them (Luke 15:20). Instead of being servants, they are restored to sonship; instead of filthy rags, they are given the best robe, a ring for their fingers, and shoes for their feet; and instead of the death they deserve, they partake of the feast of fattened calf. Blessed are they who know what it means to rest in the green pastures of God's fatherly heart. They have access to His throne of grace, which is the richest blessing in the

whole world. They may tell the Father everything. No need is too small. No sin is too great. When they ask for bread, He will not give them a stone. "As a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him" (Ps. 103:13).

Finally, true children of God may rest in the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. At Pentecost, the disciples were allowed to embrace and rest in the triune God. Through Christ, they received reconciliation with God and adoption by the Father. As the "promise of the Father," they also received an experiential knowledge of the Holy Spirit. Jesus became their Elder Brother, God became their Father, and the Holy Ghost came to dwell with them and work in them, in His offices as comforter, sealer, and intercessor (John 14:16; Eph. 1:13; Rom. 8:26). By the Spirit's dwelling in them, Christ's resurrection life dwelled in them, and the Father and the Son made their home with them (John 14:17, 19, 23). Richard Sibbes wrote that the Spirit "knits us to the Father and the Son... because all the communion we have with God is by the Holy Ghost."<sup>19</sup> Resting in the Spirit, we find ourselves resting with the Son in the heart of the Father.

Yet all resting this side of the grave is a mere shadow of the perfect, eternal, and heavenly rest to come. Moments of rest that are "unspeakable and full of glory" here on earth (1 Peter 1:8) are but a foretaste of the river of pleasure flowing out of the throne of God (Rev. 22:1). Rest on earth from the guilt and dominion of sin foreshadows eternal rest from the pollution of sin. Here on earth, children of God are pilgrims passing through a wilderness, but soon they will arrive at the Father's house, where all their sorrows shall cease and they shall enter eternal rest.

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19. Richard Sibbes, *A Description of Christ*, in *The Works of Richard Sibbes* (1862–1864; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 1:17.

In the mountains of Scotland a steep trail finally leads to a breathtaking mountain pass called Glencoe. At the top of the pass a stone is engraved with these words, “Rest, and be thankful.” Sheep of the Lord’s flock, the summit of the narrow way will be won. Here, though we are not weary *of* our Shepherd’s service, we are often weary *in* His service. But the day will come when we shall look back at the way of life with true thankfulness as we view the wisdom of every little winding turn in the steep ascent by which we were led. Here in this world our sense of rest in God is feeble at best, but “when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away...then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13:10, 12). Finally, we will know perfect, eternal rest!<sup>20</sup>

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20. This is a sample sermon from Dr. Beeke’s forthcoming book, *The Lord Shepherding His Sheep*, to be published by Evangelical Press by December, 2015 (see [www.heritagebooks.org](http://www.heritagebooks.org)).

# The Covenant LORD's Response to Rebellious Children

*Rev. David VanBrugge*

*Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD:  
though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white  
as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be  
as wool.*

—Isaiah 1:18

What would God say to those who grew up in the church but have since stopped attending? What would He say to those who sit in church but do not care about what they hear? What would He say to the prodigal sons and daughters who know they need to return home? Thankfully, we are able to answer those questions from Isaiah 1:18: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

## **He Invites**

First, we need to realize who the Lord is inviting. The covenant Lord is calling the covenant family—a family of children who are making excuses, trying to ignore the real issue, acting stubborn and foolish. This family thinks the Father—God—is the problem. And yet the Covenant Lord, who sees Himself as their Father (2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chron. 22:10; Isa. 43:6; Hos. 1:10, 2 Cor. 6:18), invites them back. Isaiah, as the covenant prosecutor, has already laid this out earlier in chapter 1, with six descriptions:

First, the invitation comes to rebellious children (vv. 2–3). The Lord has spoken: “I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.” Israel has had many blessings, but they do not even stop to think of them. They are ungrateful and ignorant. They are acting contrary to nature; even an ox and a donkey know better.

Second, the invitation comes to heirs who have abandoned their family inheritance (v. 4). They are corrupters. They have forsaken the Lord and angered Him. They have gone away backward. They are a sinful nation, weighed down with iniquity and acting contrary to their privilege.

Third, the invitation also comes to unhealthy people (vv. 5–6). It comes to those who are sick and fainting; it comes to those with no wellness in themselves. It comes to people with open wounds and sores who have no ointment and do not even use the opportunities they receive. The question comes to them, “Why should you be stricken any more?” (v. 5).

Fourth, the invitation also comes to scandalized citizens (vv. 7–10). These prosperous people had cities that were burned; their land is taken over by strangers; they are isolated as a besieged city. They have become wicked like Sodom and Gomorrah, and only the Father’s mercy spares them.

Fifth, the invitation comes to vain worshippers (vv. 11–15). Even though the Father has commanded burnt offerings and blood from bulls, He does not want it insincerely. He says to His children: To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices? What purpose is served by the trampling of My courts? For what purpose is the Sabbath and the calling of assemblies and feast days and all your prayers if you don’t do it from the heart?

Sixth, the invitation comes to evil workers and those acting unjustly (vv. 16–17). Put away your evil actions;

cease to do evil. The wrongs and the crimes of these children cannot be exaggerated. They deserve death. And yet because they were the covenant family, Israel thought they were excused. They had experienced blessing; they were religious. They did the sacrifices and held worship. They prayed. But how did God their Father see them? As rebellious, backsliding, unhealthy, scandalous, vain, and evil! Of all people, His children were like this, His own children!

How do you see yourself? As a covenant community, how should we see ourselves? Our religious activity cannot cover over our hearts' sinfulness. The blessings of our inheritance cannot cover our wrong. The Father knows all, sees all, and understands the heart—the motives and desires behind all. So, my friends, we too need to listen to the Lord as He invites, "Come!" The Father is inviting, indeed, commanding these sinners to come. Come, my rebellious, abandoning, backsliding, unhealthy, isolated, vain, evil-doing children! Come! What did the Lord say to Adam after his sin? "Adam, where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). Don't walk out on Me but walk with Me! Have you ever heard of a more generous invitation? Kings do not often invite criminals and enemies to come to them and confess their guilt. Nor do they invite them into their palaces in order to pardon them. Yet here is an invitation to both Jerusalem-sinners and Sodom-sinners; an invitation to people who are adding to their sin every day and to people who are trying to hide.

In verse 2, God called all of creation to witness His invitation. "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth!" Look at how the children have responded to their Lord, and look at how the Father deals with His children: He invites them. This is not like a mass-mailing that invites you to an event but you know the advertiser does not really care whether you attend. This invitation comes with pleading and with urgency—"Come now" (1:18). The Father does

not say to His rebellious children, Goodbye, I am done with you, depart from Me. No, He invites them to come now. “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not” (Mark 10: 14).

As earthly fathers, we might call our children to come and the inference is that we want to say something in an intimate, meaningful way. That is what God is doing as He invites. He has already said what He does not want: He wants no more vain oblations, solemn services, insincerity, cursory prayers. Rather, He want us to consider our ways, our guilt, and then turn to Him. Obey Him and walk with Him. “Come now, and let us reason together.”

If you still live as an enemy of the King, He invites you still. If you have wandered away from home, the Father invites. If you rejected His wisdom and fell back into sin a thousand times, the Lord still says to come. Keep coming; come always. Come now, even after everything you have already done against Him. God knows you cannot turn back the clock or erase years, but He still invites you. Come as you are—a rebellious, backsliding, unhealthy, idolatrous, dirty, needy prodigal who has wasted his life on riotous living. He still invites you because the situation is urgent. As George Burder says, “Is your house on fire? Escape for your life! Is the prodigal ready to starve? Run to your Father! Is the child drowning? Grab the life-line! Are you a sinner in need of forgiveness? Come now, let us reason together!”<sup>1</sup>

### **He Reasons**

Our text says, “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord.” The covenant Lord reaches out to those who think He is the problem, and He says, “Let us reason.” What does He mean by “reason”? Reason here is to discuss

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1. George Burder, *Village Sermons* (London: Tegg, 1852), 288.

or make legal dialogue; to go back and forth on an issue to prove what happened.

This reasoning is not about whether the covenant children should debate or argue whether the Father still exists, or whether He has done anything for them, or whether they as children have received what they need or want, or whether their desires should override His. The Father does not delight in arguing, but He does delight in making Himself, and His will, known. So He calls them to come and reason with Him. "Let us reason about how willing I am to show mercy and forgiveness—because that, dear children, is what you need. Let us reason about your sin and your stubbornness."

The Father wants this discussion, but He is honest: "It is your sins as wayward children that need to be discussed. It is because you have gone astray and turned to your own ways rather than following Mine that we need to talk." Sin is always inexcusable; ignoring it will never resolve it. And only when you see your sin will you understand your need for God the Father and His mercy. God is not calling for those who have no sin; this invitation is from God to those who do not deserve to be united with the Father through His Son, or be His adopted children, because they are guilty. They stand condemned. To these rebellious ones who know their need for forgiveness God the Father says, "Come, let us reason together."

Maybe you are thinking: I cannot do that; I am totally depraved, I am spiritually dead. My friend, do you think that God does not know that? Yet, He calls you in verse 16 to "wash yourself." James 4:8–9 says to "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep..." Yes, He is the only one who can open your ears, move your feet, warm your heart, and raise you from that deadness. But He is calling

you to come now and to reason with Him. He has given you thoughts and rationality, and, as Kennedy says, “if you know that you are spiritually dead, you are most unreasonable if you refuse a call from the only One who can make you alive and invites you to come.”<sup>2</sup> He gave you ears. You hear His invitation.

This is a really simple verse: God wants obedience. You cannot say you did not know or you couldn’t help sinning, or it wasn’t you. God will not bludgeon you and beat you until you listen, but He will reason with you. He does it to take away all excuses. There can be no misunderstanding of what He intends, because He is not saying, Figure it out by yourself. Rather, let us reason together. God wants you to think not about yourself or your thoughts, but about what He says. Even as the Father invites His wayward children back, He wants them to sit down and listen to His words. They must not keep talking to each other while ignoring Him. They must not keep making excuses. They must not be so loud and busy that they push their Father’s words away.

So, my friends, even though you may have objections and barriers, listen to Him rather than yourself. Even as you say:

- I can’t come, I don’t know enough about God. The Father promises that the “glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it...” (Isa. 40:5).
- I have done the opposite of what God wants; I have sinned too long. The Father says, “Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem..., that her iniquity is pardoned” (Isa. 40:2).

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2. John Kennedy, *Sermons* (Inverness: Northern Chronicle Office, 1885), 196.

- I am nothing but messed up, addicted, struggling. The Father promises that “he will feed his flock like a shepherd...and gently lead them” (Isa. 40:11).
- I have pursued sins of the world, and my heart struggles with sin. The Father promises that even though we went our own way, “the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6).
- I have tried to save myself, or I have turned to things. The Father still says, “There is no God else beside me.... Look unto me, and be ye saved” (Isa. 45:21, 22).
- I have prayed but nothing happens. The Father says, “Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live” (Isa. 55:3).
- I am afraid it's not for me. The Father still comes and says, “But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen.... Fear thou not, for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness” (Isa. 41:8, 10).

My dear friends, when you hear God's invitations and promises to these objections, are you honestly reasoning with Him? Are you hearing God's Word? Or is your mind and heart full of your own ideas? Are you listening to yourself more than God? Are you reasoning only your own ideas, or are you believing God's Word to you?

Imagine some children are playing outside after school. Their parent goes to the backdoor and says, “Children, come in now for dinner!” Are you like children who think if they ignore their parents' instructions, they can keep playing? Are you like a child who would rather have two more minutes of play plus a punishment than obedience and the blessing of a warm dinner? What did Christ say of the Pharisees? “Woe unto you! for ye shut up the

kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in” (Matt. 23:13).

There may be some here who think, I cannot come until the Spirit changes me, and will know that through a radical experience. My friend, what if your father invited you to a family meeting to discuss an ongoing issue in your family. Would you say, Only when I feel like it, and then wait for your feeling to be confirmed in some radical way? Or would you only come if your father sends his guards over to drag you back home? Or would the fact that your father is calling and inviting you to this family meeting cause you to consider it?

You cannot ignore your heavenly Father; He is the One who created you! You may come up with excuses, but you cannot ignore Him! You must acknowledge Him and His words. The goodness of the Father should lead you to repentance.

It may be that you have come before; you know that God is your Father for Christ’s sake, and yet you know that you continue to sin. You still struggle with your own heart; you still wrestle with Satan. The Father invites you, too. Even though it may seem like the life of faith is a struggle and the pure heart is not growing, He promises that “He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might, He increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint” (Isa. 40:30–31).

The covenant Lord reaches out to His rebellious children. Some of you have never yet come back; some of you have already come and wandered away again; some of you slip out once in a while and instantly regret it. Yet the door

is not closed. Rather, He invites, He reasons with you. He even gives promises for all those who do come and believe.

### **He Promises**

The promise in our text is amazing: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” The Father does not invite these rebellious and unwilling children in to give a lecture. You could say that He already laid out His case. He told them why they need His forgiveness and has proven that He is just and right. But as the merciful, loving, gentle Father that He is, He also gives them this promise.

He promises that their state of sinfulness can change to a state of purity. “Though your sins be as scarlet, they *shall be* as white as snow” (emphasis added). Again, notice that the Father acknowledges the reality of the sins. He does not dismiss them; He even acknowledges how severe they are. Yet He tells them that those sins can be forgiven—not through their own efforts. The Father can still promise forgiveness because the promise becomes the good news, the peace, the glad tidings of salvation that will be proclaimed (Isa. 52:7). The promise is guaranteed because the Servant of the Father (that Isaiah will later prophecy of) will be marred and despised. The Father's promise is secure because it pleased the Father to bruise His Servant; His servant poured out His soul unto death for the rebellious ones, was numbered with the transgressors, bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors (Isa. 53). “Though your sins be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” Because Christ's life and death satisfied the Father, your sins can be pardoned. Christ has carried the curse. He has paid the punishment.

This promise is true even if you are the worst sinner. Even if your sins are diametrically opposed to what is good

and right, this can be true for you. Because of Christ's perfect life, even though your sins are red, they will be as pristine white as snow. Because of Christ's complete sacrifice, even though your life is as stained as crimson, you can be clean as wool. Dear friends, there is no sin too great, too glaring, or too excessive that Christ's atonement cannot cover it and that the Father cannot forgive it. There is no sin so ingrained that it cannot be changed.

This promise is not just for other people; it is personal. Christ for you, your sins. You can be pardoned. This is true for you, children; for you, teens; for you, single adults; for you, parents; for you, seniors; your sins can be pardoned.

This promise is true even if you are a repeat offender. In English, we read "though your sins," but one possible translation is "as often as your sins are as scarlet." There is forgiveness available after rejecting and ignoring God. There is forgiveness available for the sins of your heart, your mind, and your desires that seem to come from deep within you. There is forgiveness available for those sins that are visible in your actions, your words, your spending habits, your parenting, your secrets, your relationships. Even if you have lived selfishly, thrown temper tantrums, hit, robbed, raped, murdered—the promise is that they will be washed away. Through Christ they will be whiter than snow.

Maybe you are thinking: I am pretty good. I do not do these bad sins. My sins are just a pale yellow, not red. What will the Father say to a child who thinks it is the other children who need forgiveness rather than him? "But thou hast not called upon me, O Jacob...Thou hast wearied me with thine iniquities.... Put me in remembrance; let us plead together.... Thy first father hath sinned, and thy teachers have transgressed against me" (Isa. 43:22–27). You are forgetting that "*all we* like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own

way” (Isa. 53:6). And yet the Father still invites you: Come, my rebellious and unwilling child.

Maybe you are thinking: This all sounds good, but I do not see any need for it. Look around—see the sin in your country, the sin in your community, the sin in your family. My friend, sin is everywhere and in everyone, including you and me. We all need pardon. When Isaiah wrote “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts,” he was not just writing about the worst public sinners. He was writing about everyone with a wicked heart and unrighteous thoughts. That is everyone, including you. But even then, what was the promise? “Let him return to the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:7).

My friend, your sins can be forgiven. Because Christ paid the price, your sins, even if they are as large and many as a sky full of clouds (Isa. 44:22), will be wiped away. If you ask why, the only answer is grace! If you ask when, the Father says, Now. Come while He permits Himself to be found (Isa. 55:6). Come while the offer is still available. Come while the gospel still reaches your ears.

Hear the voice that entreats you  
 Oh, return ye unto God...  
 He is of great compassion,  
 And of wondrous love...  
 Though your sins be as scarlet,  
 They shall be as white as snow.

Have you heard and obeyed that voice? Have you felt His cleansing? The covenant Lord is telling you that you cannot find peace in religion until your sins are forgiven. He is demonstrating that He wants to pardon every member of the covenant family, and pleading for sinners to come to Him for pardon—for the first time or for the tenthousandth time.

Just as the sins of the children cannot be exaggerated, the Father's forgiveness cannot be exaggerated either. It is more radical, more complete, than the sins of the repentant children. Romans 5 says that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." Christians often speak longingly of the day when the white robes of righteousness will be worn and seen (Rev. 7); but God promises that today, today your sins can be washed as white as snow!

And yet there is a condition: you must obey in true repentance. You cannot come to the holy Lord, glibly say, "I'm sorry," and then continue to live your rebellious life. You need to be convinced and sincere. Because the consequences are eternal. Look at verse 20: "But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it." Disobedience and refusal will be punished—not by man, but by the Father Himself. At the end of Isaiah, a similar warning is recorded: "I will number (destine) you to the sword, and ye shall all bow down to the slaughter: because when I called, ye did not answer; when I spake, ye did not hear, but did evil before mine eyes" (65:12). God leaves no excuses for not obeying this call. He invites because He is willing to reason with you; your disobedience shows your own stubbornness, not His unwillingness.<sup>3</sup>

So come now, let us reason. All who hear, are willing, obey, and come, will be blessed. Even if they were rebellious, unhealthy, scandalous, formalistic; even if they disowned their family; they will be blessed. Go back to verse 19: "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land." Chapter 65 also describes those blessings: "Behold, my servants shall eat...behold, my servants shall drink...behold, my servants shall rejoice...my servants shall sing for joy of heart.... But be ye glad and

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3. Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 1:18.

rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people” (Isa. 65:13–23). What did the prodigal son say? “I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no longer worthy to be called thy son” (Luke 15:18–19). And he received the best robe, a ring, a kiss, a feast, and full joy!

Isaiah began his ministry to Judah and Jerusalem with a plea that the people consider their ways. As the covenant Lord calls His rebellious and unwilling children around Him, and openly reveals their wrong actions and their heart problems, what will these children do? What will you do? Because the Father still calls you: “Come now, and let us reason together...though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”

