

# Day Seventeen

## **Scripture:**

Isaiah 40:10-11

## **Reflection:**

The earliest painting of Jesus ever discovered was over the baptistry at the remodeled house church in the Roman town of Dura-Europos in eastern Syria near the Euphrates river. The building was apparently once a private home. It had been renovated to serve as a gathering place for Christians. The artwork is obviously by some local church member. The image of Jesus is crudely drawn over the small baptismal pool where converts would be immersed. It was painted by at least AD 220 and, quite probably, several decades before that. The image is familiar, even to our eyes. Jesus is standing in a pasture, carrying a lamb over his shoulders. It is the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, who cares for His flock.

From the earliest centuries of the church, one of the images of Jesus Christians have found compelling is that of a shepherd. It is no wonder Isaiah included this as one image he wanted people to associate with the coming Messiah. A shepherd is someone with power over the sheep. But, equally important, his authority is rooted in guarding and caring for the sheep. It is not the authority of a taskmaster or tyrant. It is the authority of one who invests effort and personal risks to make sure the flock is well fed and safe from predators and thieves.

The image of a shepherd-king is deeply rooted in scripture, both in the stories of the shepherd King David and in the many allusions to God as a shepherd and Israel as His flock. This linkage connecting authority with care is an essential framework of life in the Kingdom of God. Whether parents over children, husbands over families or leaders over churches, the Bible insists that authority should exist only where love and concern are also present. Leaders must love those being led. Leadership without love, whether in the home or the church, replaces biblical authority with secular tyranny.

In preparing the world for the coming of Jesus, God has drawn clear connections between King and shepherd. With Jesus, of course, that line will point to the Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep. Jesus is the King who becomes the Shepherd. He is also none other than the Lamb who was slain. Thus, the ultimate authority became the ultimate servant. The Latin word for shepherd is one we still use: pastor. The church has one Head Pastor (I Peter 5:4) who is both king and sacrifice.

In 1974, Gloria Gaither wrote these lyrics to the song Gentle Shepherd:

Gentle Shepherd come and lead us  
For we need you to help us find our way  
Gentle Shepherd come and feed us  
For we need your strength from day to day

## **Family:**

Why do you (children) enjoy taking care of pets or make-believe things like dolls or stuffed animals? What makes us

want to feed them and spend time with them? They cannot really talk to us. Since I used to keep a pet box turtle, I can promise you this is true. Turtles do not say much. Turtles never actually loves us back (they just sort of tolerate us being around, just like most house cats). Ask people to talk about why it is we like to care for all these things.

When the Bible talks about shepherds, those are people who not only own the sheep, they spend time out in the fields with the sheep. They move them around to make sure the sheep get enough food and water. They protect them from wolves.

One of the ways the Bible wants us to think about Jesus is to think of a shepherd. The Jesse Tree ornament today is from a passage in the book of Isaiah that describes God. (Isaiah 40:10) God is pictured as a powerful King. A King who rewards faithful subjects and a King who punishes wicked subjects. Jesus is described in the same way. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. That's like saying if you line up all the most powerful rulers from all over the world through all history, Jesus is still in authority over them.

But, in the very next verse (40:11), God is also described as a shepherd who picks up helpless little lambs to keep them safe. If you think about the story of Christmas, you see both of those ideas. The Wise Men come because they know Jesus is a King. But, before the wise men get to Bethlehem, shepherds who had been taking care of their flocks at night are sent to find the baby Jesus. Think about that: right in the story of Christmas we read about a King being born and we read about shepherds being sent to the stable.

## **Prayer:**

In your prayer, turn your thoughts first to those who have taken care of you, now or, perhaps, many years ago. Take the time to pray out loud and tell God you are thankful for these people (go ahead and name some of them) who were like shepherds that helped take care of you. Let each person have a turn saying the name of some of these people.

Now, think about things that you help care for right now. For younger children, it's okay if they mentioned make-believe things. It's also okay to think about pets or farm animals that you care for.

Ask God to help make sure that there are always shepherds around to watch over us, and to help us be like shepherds who take care of others. Think about at least one "shepherd" (leader) at church that not only has to be in charge of things but also really cares for the people in church. Pray for that leader by name and ask God to help them in their role as a shepherd for the church.