

It had been years since they last saw ‘home.’ And by ‘home’ they were thinking of the way it used to be back in Judah, especially in Jerusalem the ‘golden city.’ Just to picture that place with the Temple of Solomon looming over the city so awesome and majestic, even for a moment the warmth of that memory made the coldness of their captivity melt away. That Temple had stood for centuries, reminding the flock of Israel that the Lord was their Shepherd. And even so far away, the thought of seeing that glorious sight once again filled their hearts with the hope that life would one day go back to the way it was supposed to be.

But that was so many years ago, almost 20 years for some of them who had been enlisted for service in the government of Nebuchadnezzar. He was the Babylonian King who at first deported only the most talented and capable people like Daniel. But then about eight years later, in 597 B.C., he came back to crush the rebellion led by King Jehoiachin. And another group of captives, including Ezekiel the prophet, was led away to Babylon, leaving them to dream of seeing the Temple and their home some day.

And that dream – that image of the Temple and their home – meant everything to these captives in Babylon. Things could go back to normal. The Lord would still be their God, and they would still be his chosen, special people. It filled them with the hope of freedom and peace. Isn’t that the divine message Ezekiel was relaying to them? ***“²⁷They will know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them.”*** Now that’s the kind of Shepherd they knew the Lord was – the kind that comes to rescue and save his sheep and not leave them without a real home! Or without their Temple!

But there would be no Temple in this new home – not the one they remembered back in Jerusalem. For over 12 years that’s what Ezekiel was trying to tell them, that the way things were back home in Jerusalem with the Temple and everything would not continue to be. The Lord would not allow their lives to continue the way they used to be.

And if they really thought about it, they might understand why the Lord didn’t want that for his sheep. Isn’t it strange the way people romanticize the good old days, longing for the memories of days gone by, thinking of how much better and simpler life would be if it was more now like it was then? Their life in Jerusalem may have given them the comfort of belonging and familiarity, but they had become too comfortable. They had become so used to that wonderful Temple in their midst, the symbol of God’s abiding presence, that they got used to doing whatever they wanted. They enjoyed their freedom, gratifying their human desires with no immediate consequences, wandering like sheep from the path that the Lord had shown them. And after a while of hearing the same old calls to repentance along with what seemed to be empty threats, it got really easy to ignore God’s prophets. And it was just a matter of time.

And when God’s hammer finally came down, something ironic happened. The people blamed God! They said he was cruel and unfair to treat his chosen people this way. For over 12 years Ezekiel had been warning them that this day of destruction would come. It would happen because of *their* own rebellion and sin; THEY had treated God unfairly. Many realized this and repented. But many others refused to believe that God would ever allow any such thing to happen. And when the word finally came that Jerusalem had fallen, that the Temple had been burned to the ground, many thought, ***“This isn’t fair! We are supposed to be his chosen people!”***

Over 600 years later Jesus stood in Solomon’s Porch, where he saw the same self-righteousness and delusion in the hearts of those who claimed to be ‘God’s chosen people.’ They came looking for him, because they wanted to trap him. They asked if he was the Christ, because they wanted to stone him to death for blasphemy. ***“²⁵Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, ²⁶but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.”*** Jesus spoke these direct words against them for the very same reason God spoke through his prophets like Ezekiel: to warn sinners against their own failure and about their need to repent. The Good Shepherd loved them and wanted them to turn from their self-righteousness and be part of his flock again. But they didn’t want to be part of a flock with a shepherd like Jesus. They were their own shepherds, and Jesus wasn’t offering anything they needed anyway. At least that’s what they thought.

It makes you wonder, ***“What does it take for some people to understand just how much they really need Jesus?”*** We could explain how Jesus is our Good Shepherd, and we are his sheep who need him to guide us and protect us. But no one wants to be compared to a sheep, because sheep have a reputation of not being intellectually challenged. They wander and get lost. They don’t have sharp claws or fangs to defend themselves, so they’re relatively defenseless prey. Granted, they are quite fluffy and cute, but who wants to be known as ‘fluffy and cute?’ As accurate and meaningful as that analogy is, it offends our sensibilities and our self-respect. I mean, c’mon – we’re not that clueless or weak, are we?

You know the difference between right and wrong according to God's commandments. Maybe you've learned to be aware of your surroundings, to understand your personal weaknesses and pet sins, and what situations to try to avoid. You also understand that God doesn't make empty threats and that even his promise of judgment and punishment for sins is very serious. On Good Friday we had an up-close-and-personal look at just how serious God is about our sins. He allowed the blood of his own innocent Son to be spilled on the cross, because that's what our sins deserved.

You even know what amazing blessings are yours because of Jesus. The Good Shepherd walked the path of perfection and life. And when the Lamb of God laid down his life for the sins of the world, he knew that he would take it up again. He rose from the grave to prove to the whole world that what he promised is true, **"²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."** With Christ as your Shepherd, you have forgiveness of sins. You have a life full of joy and meaning. And you have the certain hope of eternal life. And no one or anything can snatch you from his hands.

With Christ as our Shepherd, we can expect all the blessings he promises to his chosen people: **"²⁵ 'I will make a covenant of peace with them...so that they may live... in safety. ²⁶ ... I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. ²⁷ ... the people will be secure in their land.... ²⁸ ... They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid. ²⁹ ...they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations.'**" God gives us this picture and promise of the home that will one day be ours again, and we long for that freedom and safety and peace!

But sometimes we expect our Shepherd to make that promise a reality for us even in this temporary home. Like his chosen people in exile, maybe we get too comfortable here and forget that God has already promised us another home that is better by far. And maybe sometimes we want to forget, so that we can justify our reasons for wandering off the path that our Shepherd has been leading us along. We put so much of our own time and energy into making this life here and now seem more permanent than it is, and we lose sight of the eternal home that he's prepared for us. THIS is the home of freedom, safety and peace that he's told us about.

But it seems so far off and distant to be real all the time. And it seems so unfair that God would restrain our living and enjoyment of this world with all those commandments. Who likes to feel guilty for their sins? Do you like to keep telling yourself, "No, you can't treat others that way? You can't say whatever you want, because it's not always pleasing to God? And even your thoughts can lead your heart astray?" Does our Shepherd really expect us to follow him that closely all the time? Or maybe he knows we'll sin and wander off and do foolish things, and he'll come and rescue us anyway. **"And besides, I know how far I can divert from the path to have a good time without going to far."**

You know who thinks like that? Sheep. We are sheep, and sometimes we are clueless as to just how weak we are. We don't understand how amazing and wonderful that home is that our Shepherd is leading us to, and how inferior and pathetic this sinful world is. And when we don't get what we want in this world, we complain that God is unfair, because he doesn't give us what we deserve.

And it's true, because instead of giving us what we deserve – a life of misery and pain – he showers us with his blessings. Instead of allowing us to live with the fear of dying and an eternity of hell, God raised Jesus to life to secure our victory over death and the devil. **"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish."** Our Shepherd has provided everything we need for our bodies and lives in this world. And so that we can be content with what he gives us, he has promised to lead us to a place where we will never hunger or thirst, where we will never feel the scorching heat of the effects of sin that beat upon us in this world. **"¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."**

Even without the actual memories or photo albums of this home, you know it's ready and waiting. God has promised it, and we can hold him to his word. Rejoice in his promise of safety and peace in your eternal home, because Jesus has fulfilled God's covenant of peace. And one day everything will be the way it's supposed to be, no more sin, crying or pain – just one flock and one Shepherd forever. For now you are washed in the blood of the Lamb; live each day with this promise of God's love before your eyes. Trust him with all your heart. Give thanks for the way he leads and cares for you each day. Encourage one another as we follow our Shepherd on the way that leads to our eternal home. Amen.

What Do You Expect from Your Good Shepherd?