

Our God — Victor And Shepherd.

Text: Isa 40:9-11

1) The picture of God as a victorious God

Suggested Hymns:

2) The picture of God as the Good Shepherd

99, 97, 184, 283, 387

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Isaiah 40:9-11, *’O Zion, You who bring good tidings, Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, Lift it up, be not afraid; Say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”*

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, And His arm shall rule for Him; Behold, His reward is with Him, And His work before Him. ¹¹ He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Our text gives us a picture of God. But it is really a double picture. The one picture is that of God as the mighty Conqueror. Few portions of Holy Scripture can match the fervour and exultation with which Isaiah summons his fellow believers to pay their homage to the conquering God.

But suddenly, right in the midst of his victory song, Isaiah’s mood changes, and he turns to another picture of God. It is that of a Shepherd. The keeper of the sheep was at the opposite end of the social scale from the leader of armies. His meekness and humbleness was a complete contrast to the prowess of the military conqueror.

But Isaiah puts his pictures of God together. He tells us to ponder them in conjunction with each other. We cannot get a true view of God without looking at them both and realising how they belong together. In these unsettling times we need to become better acquainted with God as He really shows Himself to us through His Prophet. Let us consider *The victorious God who is also the Good Shepherd.* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Picture Of God As A Victorious God

“Behold your God!” Isaiah summons us, like dwellers of the ancient hill country, to climb to the highest vantage point and gaze at the approach of God, the mighty Victor.

He summons us, like citizens of a great town, to join our voices in the clamour of greeting and to sound the glad alarm to every ear. God is here with us, God, the Victor over every foe!

Those are splendid figures of speech. What do they mean? And who can feel that way about God, to welcome Him as a mighty Victor? Victor over what?

The preceding portion of the 40th chapter of Isaiah speaks of comfort for Israel, of forgiveness for her sin, of God’s mighty grace to take away her need. It brings a prophecy about the man who would be the forerunner of the Saviour and about his message and comfort. Those are the facts which lead Isaiah to break forth in a song of victory.

Hence this picture of God as Victor is a most important one. It does not show us a god who comes to oppress human beings, to rejoice in their unhappiness, or to burden them with misery. But it shows us a God who sets people free from their bondage and takes the burdens from their souls.

For God is the Conqueror of the enemies which have taken mankind into bondage, sin and Satan. He has already gained the victory over these enemies, Isaiah tells us; He comes now as Conqueror. His enemies are those who try to get along without Him, who declare their independence of Him, and who try to lead others to follow their examples.

Beginning with the first human couple, Satan has shown himself as the persistent rebel against the authority of God, and the nagging tempter and persecutor of the souls of men. But God has gained the victory.

That victory, God won through Jesus Christ, the Captain of our salvation. Through the Lord Jesus God reconstructed a highway back to Himself, John the Baptist being the forerunner.

In direct language, that means that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, fulfilled the Law in our stead and took upon Himself the penalty of man’s sin and suffered death and rejection from God on the Cross. Thus the way is open again for God to work

in man; God and man are reconciled; the enemies of man's soul are defeated completely.

How joyfully we sang just before:¹

The strife is o'er, the battle done;
Now is the Victor's triumph won;
O let the song of praise be sung.
Alleluia!

He broke the bonds of death and hell;
The bars from heaven's high portals fell:
Let hymns of joy His triumph tell.
Alleluia!

But let us look more closely at this picture of the victorious God. He celebrates His victory not simply in a remote and unapproachable majesty. But it is a victory over the foes of His people. He wants His people to profit by His conquest, and He wants to share the spoils of victory with them. Our text says, ***Behold, His reward is with Him, And His work before Him.*** That is what makes the song of jubilee so joyous: the victorious God shares His victory with His people!

God has not only vanquished enemies, but He comes to help those who trust in Him as their God and Lord. Behind this vivid picture lies a fact which is so well known to every Christian that it becomes ordinary, and yet it is one of the grandest truths of our faith. That is, that God, now having reconciled us to Himself through the work of Jesus Christ, reaches out to us all, with His Word and Spirit, and seeks to make us His own.

He sounds out the story of His victory through Christ, not simply to demand honour and acclaim for Himself, but to convey hope and life to people. ***"The Word of our God stands forever."***² Here the Prophet describes the essence of the Gospel of Christ and His forerunner. That message of God's love in Christ is everlastingly true, and it is everlastingly helpful!

It is God's way of reaching out of the unapproachable light in which He dwells right down into the lives and needs of men and telling them, ***"I am your God! I am your Father! In Christ My victory over sin and death has become yours!"*** Hence

the Prophet shouts his encouragement in our text to the people of God: Tell the story! *O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, ... Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"* We have reviewed the story of the battle and the victory in the suffering and death and rising again of the Lord Jesus. Now the watchword of the victorious God is: Tell it to others! Spread the news!

One of the hardest things for our nation to learn, when peace came, was that nothing happens just with the winning of victories. We must go on to win the peace. Our victorious God does not make the mistake of resting on His laurels. But the victory over sin and death is simply the beginning of life for His people. ¹⁰ *Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, And His arm shall rule for Him; Behold, His reward is with Him, And His work before Him.*

He comes to share the fruits of His victory; but that means that He comes to set up a rule and a Kingdom over men that simply marks the beginning of their true existence. People are still ridden by sin. Our world is beset by fear and pain. The simplest token of God's life in man is that man loves his fellow men and can get along with them.

Judged by that token, the life of God in men is at low ebb, indeed. But the victorious God does not stand by like a demobilised puppet. He marches on to a true occupation of the Kingdom! Here we have the real meaning of God's victory for our own selves. He comes to help us. The glory song rings out: *Be not afraid.* The message of Christ's age sounds through this whole chapter, ¹ *"Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" Says your God.* ² *"Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the LORD's hand Double for all her sins."*³

The great fact which we have to tell our age is this: God is not defeated! God has not left us! For He has conquered the enemies of the soul of man — fear, sin, death — and He comes to give help and healing and life! That is our mission and privilege and glad news: In Christ we have that help and that healing!

2. The Picture Of God As The Good Shepherd

Our victorious is a big fact to pack into one picture. It is a scene full of majesty and power: God victorious over the enemies of God and man, God coming

to help man with the fruits of His victory. But it is a scene full of tenderness and pity, too.

Hence the Prophet turns the page and paints another picture. He is not changing the subject. He is still talking about the same God who has conquered sin through the work of Jesus Christ. But the Prophet wants to emphasise this thing of helpfulness and tender regard for men. And so he paints the picture of the victorious God as a Good Shepherd.

What the imagery of war-like prowess and clamour cannot do, perhaps this figure of the Good Shepherd will make more clear. After all, we are beset by problems and we need help from God. But are we, perhaps, too fearful to listen to the military music of the triumphal procession? Are we too ashamed to wait our turn at the distribution of the Victor's spoils?

Very well, let us lift our eyes to Him who comes with healing in His wings. Let us become acquainted with Him who would save us to the uttermost. Let us think of the victorious God as our Good Shepherd.

The business of the shepherd is to feed. He has no significance outside of that purpose. The good shepherd succeeds in feeding, sustaining, and protecting. Here is the glory of this picture: That is exactly what God wants to do! He wants to build up! He is not pleased with the death of the wicked; but He wants the wicked to turn from his way and live! And He wants that life, not only with wishes; but He has the nourishment and the life in His own grasp to give, and He is in charge of the feeding!

The Christian religion is the story of God at work to do precisely this thing of shepherding souls. On this Sunday we love to ponder the fact that Christ is our Good Shepherd. By that, our Saviour tells us that it is through He Himself whom the heavenly Father succeeds in gathering His sheep to His own fold, saving and protecting them from harm, nurturing and safeguarding their lives.

Jesus is that because He came into the world as true man and true God and gave Himself into death for the sins of the whole world. He made the supreme sacrifice; a good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.

By that atonement on the Cross, Jesus Christ was God's agent for restoring peace between God and man, for re-establishing God's life in man. The story of His work becomes the Bread of Life, and the Water of Life, the food that the human

soul can feast upon so that it need never face death any more, but live to all eternity. As we ponder that Gospel and teach it to one another and tell our community and our world about it, this great picture of God takes meaning: He shall feed His flock like a shepherd.

There is more to see in this picture of the Good Shepherd. Our text says, *He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young.* What do we see in that activity of the shepherd? We see interesting manipulations of the shepherd's craft; but more: We see into the heart of the shepherd.

The shepherd does not say, *"Those weaklings! Those inconsiderate beasts! How can I cull out the lagging ones and keep back only those that can walk on their own feet and give me as little trouble as possible?"* No, that is not the way the good shepherd thinks. But he is concerned particularly with the weak! They are his business! He wants the little ones to grow up; he wants the faltering and weak to survive their trials and stay in the flock.

This, then, is what the Prophet wants us to learn about God. He is a God who is strong enough to overcome all opposition to Himself, pure and just enough to reject everyone who rejects Him.

But we cannot afford to think of God just in human terms. We cannot stop with the concept of a blustery and ruthless and icy character. But God is love. And the love of God means not the desire that God may have to exalt Himself and have His own way simply; but God wants the good of men.

He wants our good not because we are already good; for, after all, we have all gone aside; *"all we like sheep have gone astray"*⁴ the Scriptures say. But God's love for men is for men in their need and misery and pain. *The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.*⁵ His power and help is for men in need. His victory is for those who have suffered in bondage. *"My grace is sufficient for you,"* He says, *"for My strength is made perfect in weakness."*⁶

We can understand a little more clearly what this all implies when we notice how God wants us to minister this attitude of His and convey this love of His to others. He counsels His under-shepherds — we call them pastors — to feed the flock not as lords, but as examples and guides and helpers.

St. Paul tells Timothy how the Christian goes about it to bring this love of God to bear upon a soul which is straying even in unbelief, *a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, ²⁵ in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, ²⁶ and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.*⁷ Thus the Saviour went about His task of winning souls, *“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”*⁸

But let our chief purpose in this sermon today not be to equip ourselves for communicating the love of the Good Shepherd to others, important as that purpose is in our life on earth.

Today let us gaze at this picture of the Good Shepherd for our own sake. Let us face the fact that we ourselves are so weak, so apt to stray and err. Let us understand how riddled we ourselves are with shortcomings, meeting our Father’s love with forgetfulness, His guidance with straying, and His care with sin.

And then let us realise that even though the just God might cast us off forever, yet He will not consume us. But He is ready again to take the limping lamb into His bosom; and He will not hurry the sheep handicapped by weakness, nor test it above that it is able, but will help and sustain.

Above all, let us remember how that help comes. God does not help us merely by overlooking our errors and our weaknesses. But He actually improves them. He forgives them for Jesus’ sake; but through the same power of that fact that Jesus died for our sins, He enables us to take the Spirit of God into our lives ever more richly and to produce His fruits a hundredfold.

If God *did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?*⁹ Right in the fears and gloom of life around us, right in the inconstancy and failure of our life itself, God is ready to stand by, to sustain and to feed and to guide, and the more we recognise and deplore our own frailty, the more powerful He is to serve and to save.

That serving and saving God does through the fact that Christ Jesus is our Salvation, and has brought home to us and applied to us with new mercy every day, in the Word and Sacrament of Jesus’ love.

Little children like to look at pictures. Some pictures they turn to with special frequency, and they fondle them and cherish them till they get frayed and grubby with their handling.

Let us take before us these two pictures of God: the strong Victor and the tender Shepherd. Let us recognise them and understand them as pictures of the same God, the God for us in Christ Jesus. Let us treasure them with the simple joy of God's own dear children. Let us handle them and clutch them tightly every day. We cannot wear them out. God will print them ever more brightly upon our hearts in His own fair colours of faith and love. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Hymn 97

² Isaiah 40:8

³ Isaiah 40:1-2

⁴ Isaiah 53:6

⁵ John 6:37

⁶ 2 Corinthians 12:9

⁷ 2 Timothy 2:24-26

⁸ Matthew 11:28

⁹ Romans 8:32