

When was the last time you offered this commentary on your life? “I’ve had it. I’m done. I’m deader than a door-nail; a lost cause;” or my favorite, “it’s time to throw in the towel.”

The Israelites felt this way during the dark days of the Babylonian exile. Our text has eighth century BC Isaiah positioning himself to speak to this sixth century BC lost cause. You see, already in the eighth century, Isaiah knew that the days were coming when Israel would have no temple, no Jerusalem, no king from the line of David, no annual pilgrim feasts, no commercial or political significance, and no hope! The towel has been thrown! Or to use the words from Psalm 137:1, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.”

In Isaiah 49:9–12, the message of redemption announces the Servant’s release of prisoners. He will gather them from all directions. While the specific word *shepherd* does not appear in these verses, the words *graze*, *pasture*, *lead*, and *guide* make it clear that the Servant is a very good Shepherd. He leads His flock to find food on barren heights, and in the hottest of weather He gives His sheep unlimited water. Their path is straight, compared with the normally hilly country where it is difficult to graze. This Servant has the ability to tend to a huge number of sheep that are drawn from great distances. He even promises in our text, “They shall not hunger or thirst.”

Now sheep are not intimidating creatures. The NFL has teams called the Chicago Bears, the Detroit Lions, the Jacksonville Jaguars, and the Carolina Panthers. I can guarantee you that there will never, ever be an NFL expansion team called the L.A. Lambs or the San Antonio Sheep! What would the cheerleaders say, “Fleece ’em, Fleece ’em, ba, ba, ba!”?

Sheep are not intimidating creatures; in fact, sheep are dumb. They graze on the same hills until those hills turn to desert wastes, polluted with disease. Sheep bend down to drink from a pond, get too close, allow the water to absorb into their wool, fall in, and drown! We aren’t like that, are we?

Sheep are dirty. Their wool is like a magnet. It attracts mud, manure, maggots. It becomes caked with dirt, decay, disease. Sheep absorb every particle of filth in the atmosphere. We aren’t like that, are we?

Sheep are defenseless. They turn over on their back to rest, but then they can’t get up. Canines, coyotes, and cougars all know that a cast sheep is a sitting duck! But we aren’t like that, are we?

Israel had been **just** like that, and so they threw in the towel in 587 BC. They were conquered, captured and forced into exile in Babylon. all because they had been like sheep!

Simply put, they were dumb. Isaiah 1:3 states, “The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand.” Israelites were dirty. Isaiah 64:6 states, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” And the people were defenseless. Isaiah 1:6 states, “From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness, only wounds and welts and open sores.” We’re not like that, are we?

We are **just** like that, aren’t we? Isaiah 53:6 makes it clear: “We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” And what is the result? “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion” (Psalm 137:1). You and I are living testimonies of lost causes, of all too often being spiritually deader than a doornail. We are exiled—so far from the Father’s will and ways; so far from bearing each other’s pain and burdens; so far from spouses, children, sisters, brothers.

So, what’s a Shepherd to do? He only has one option: to become a Lamb. But not any ordinary Lamb; “A virgin will conceive and bear a Son and you will call His name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). “His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6). This is no ordinary Lamb; “He was led like a Lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth” (53:7).

On Maundy Thursday, events began to unfold that wouldn’t lead Him to green pastures. Rather spit and blood would be caked to His cheeks. There would be no quiet waters; in fact, there was no water at all. His lips would be cracked and swollen and His throat parched from the hot Palestinian sun. He would pass through the valley of the shadow of death. There would be no rod or staff for comfort. The cup would overflow all right, as He drank from the cup of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. Surely goodness and mercy would be twisted and perverted in the most inhumane way.

Reflecting on this great love, Peter writes, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:24–25). This is why we have the promise, “They shall not hunger or thirst.”

“This is My body.” The Shepherd quenches our thirst with His body and blood—in, with, and under the bread and wine. When we come to this table, we receive forgiveness, mercy, and salvation. Because of these gifts in the Holy Supper, we will not hunger or thirst again!

When I am lost, lonely, and exiled, Jesus my Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and runs after me. When I am confused by the voices inside my head of anxieties and fears, and by the sinful world, and indeed all the forces of the devil, my Good Shepherd, Jesus calls me by name and I know His voice. When I am dirty and full of filth, He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus is my Shepherd who gathers me safe in His arms until I am better, holds me until I can live with the hurt, and carries me close to His heart forever. Amen.