

Characteristics of the Great Shepherd The Ascended Shepherd

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The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

In this series we have been considering Jesus as the “Great Shepherd of the sheep” in a variety of different aspects. We have thought of Him as:

- The Living Shepherd – who met with Mary after His resurrection.
- The Restoring Shepherd – who restored Peter to service after his denial of the Lord.
- The Enflaming Shepherd – who set on fire the hearts of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.
- The Assuring Shepherd – who gathered, calmed, taught, and commissioned the disciples.
- The Teaching Shepherd – who breakfasted with the disciples by the lake side.
- And the Gathering Shepherd – who gave the disciples the Great Commission to make more disciples.

Today, we conclude the series by considering the Great Shepherd as The Ascended Shepherd, who has gone up to heaven.

The use of the word “great” here indicates greatness in scale, importance or majesty. The angel, speaking to Mary about the Son she would have, said, “He will be great.” Hebrews 4:14 refers to Christ as our “great High Priest.” Even when Jesus is being described as a man, a high priest, or a shepherd He is distinguished from every other example of this kind by being uniquely “great.”

It will be useful to remind ourselves of the verse that uses the expression the “Great Shepherd” and the immediate context of that verse. Let me read Hebrews 13:20,21.

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Verse 21 presents us with the intended outcome of the Great Shepherd’s work, that is, to prepare us to do every good work that God wants us to do and so to give God pleasure. The pleasure which God will receive will be as much in the change to our characters, which will prepare us for the good works, as in the good works themselves. All of this will bring glory to the Great Shepherd, to whom God has declared that there will be glory “forever and ever.”

The question for today is how the Ascension of the Lord Jesus serves to prepare us for these things. I don’t know about you, but I think of a Shepherd as being close by the sheep, very much ‘on the ground’ you might say. So that makes me wonder how an Ascended Shepherd might

operate! How can He be close by me, His sheep, if He is in heaven and I am on the earth? I can think of at least three ways in which the Bible says He accomplishes this.

1. By indwelling us through the Holy Spirit

In John 14:18, in a passage that is all about the coming Holy Spirit, Jesus tells the disciples, “I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.” In verse 23 He adds, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.” It is because of this that He can say to them, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). If the Father and the Son, the Great Shepherd, come and make their home within us by the indwelling Holy Spirit, then He is even nearer to us today than He was to the disciples when He was physically present with them.

2. By always being awake and ready to hear and respond

We all know that it is possible for people to be sat right with us but to have their thoughts and attention somewhere else entirely! Psalm 121:3,4 promise, “He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.” The word translated “keeps” can be used for the tending of a flock and I am sure that Christians today can be every bit as certain that their Great Shepherd is always awake and paying full, personal attention to their prayers and needs.

3. By His very personal interest and understanding

In John 10:14 Jesus declares, “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.” Here He makes plain that His sheep are not just a uniform mass but individuals whom He knows and who know Him personally. The Lord Jesus didn’t say that this only applied while He was living in this world. In this passage about the Good Shepherd, Jesus speaks about laying down His life and taking it up again. Clearly, His personal connection to His sheep continues after His resurrection and ascension.

Hopefully I have established from the Bible how the Ascended Shepherd remains close by His sheep today. Now I want to think about the ways that His ascension benefits us. I am going look at eight things that Christ’s ascension produces or promises for us. I am sure there are more!

His ascension produces or promises:

1. The coming of the Holy Spirit.
2. Worldwide presence and power.
3. The power of heaven engaged for us.
4. Christ’s return for us.
5. A home prepared for us.
6. An Intercessor in heaven.
7. Joy!
8. Our commission.

1. The Coming of the Holy Spirit

We’ve already thought about how the Holy Spirit makes the Ascended Shepherd close to us. In John 16:7, Jesus told the disciples, “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” Jesus says that the coming of the Holy Spirit is better for them than His remaining with them as He has up until then. Maybe, like me, you have sometimes thought how fantastic it would have been to have lived at the time when people could see Jesus physically present in this world and witness some of the amazing things that He did. This verse tells us that living in the time that we do, and having Jesus as the Ascended Shepherd, made present to us by the Holy Spirit, and with the Spirit to help us understand Jesus’ teachings, is actually much better!

2. Worldwide Presence and Power

Another advantage of the coming of the Holy Spirit following the Lord's ascension is the universal presence of the Ascended Shepherd with all His flock. Put simply, when He was physically present in this world, Jesus could only be in one place at a time. His presence with the disciples was a great privilege for them, but one that very few others could share. Now the Ascended Shepherd is present with every single one of His Sheep at the same time. It is hard for us to understand how this works, but easy enough to enjoy the presence of the Shepherd with us in every detail of our lives, all the time!

Before he was raised from the dead, the two sisters of Lazarus both said to Jesus, "If You had been here..." (John 11:21,32). No Christian has to say that today because He is always here, wherever 'here' may be.

3. The Power of Heaven Engaged for Us

The power that was evident to the disciples when they followed Jesus on the earth is also now available to every believer all the time. In Mark's account of the ascension we read, "So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen" (Mark 16:19-20). I don't suppose that this means we should expect signs and wonders today. It does mean that all of the power that belongs to the Ascended Shepherd in heaven is available to those who are working with Him. It is simple enough to put this into the imagery of a shepherd. We have somebody protecting us who has far more power than our strongest enemy or 'predator.' We have an Ascended Shepherd who is strong enough to carry us on His shoulders when we are struggling to move forward. Our Shepherd is the one who is responsible for providing the power required to complete His work of building, and building up, His church.

4. Christ's Return for Us

The previous talk in this series considered Jesus as the Gathering Shepherd, commanding the disciples to make many more disciples. But the Ascended Shepherd will also do some other gathering – He will return to gather every believer to Himself! Let's read some verses from Acts chapter 1.

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' And He said to them, It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (vv. 8).

Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.' Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey (vv. 9-12).

At the very time of His ascension, the angel gives the disciples the promise of His return – the two are tightly bound together. Jesus did not ascend to heaven to stay there permanently all alone! In John 10:16 Jesus said, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd." The Ascended Shepherd is

committed to gathering together one flock, made up of Jews and Gentiles of every nationality. When that flock is complete, He will return to take them all to be with Himself before He comes to reign, when He will bring all His own with Him.

5. A Home Prepared for Us

In a well-known Bible passage, Jesus spoke to His disciples about where their home would be in the future. "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2,3). Jesus was always at home with the Father in heaven, but He wanted us to be at home there as well. The Ascended Shepherd has prepared a place specifically for you, if you are one of His sheep!

It is the fulfilment of what David anticipated in Psalm 23, the well-known shepherd psalm, when he wrote, "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

6. An Intercessor in Heaven.

Paul wrote to the Romans, "Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (Romans 8:34). Somebody who makes intercession is called an intercessor and the dictionary defines an intercessor as, 'a person who intervenes on behalf of another, especially by prayer.' Intercession is strongly connected to another Bible word used to describe the Lord Jesus; that is the word advocate. 1 John 2:1 says, "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." The word translated as Advocate in this verse is also used by Jesus Himself in John's Gospel chapters 14, 15 and 16 to describe the Holy Spirit, only there it is translated Helper or Comforter.

Paul emphasises the fact that Jesus is "risen" and "at the right hand of God" when he talks about Jesus interceding for us. The Ascended Shepherd is uniquely placed to intercede for us both by who He is and where He is. He is God's own Son and can speak with Him on the level of an equal. He has ascended to heaven and occupies the place of great closeness and trust at God's right hand, so we can imagine Him speaking a quiet word into the Father's ear on our behalf. The Father already loves us and accepts us as His own – we don't need Christ's advocacy to turn the Father's heart towards us. Christ's death and resurrection have already removed the guilt of our sins, so John is not saying that we need Christ's intercession to get our sins forgiven. Rather Christ in heaven, at the Father's right hand is the perpetual evidence that my sins are forever removed and that the One that died to pay for them is now alive forever and accepted back in heaven – therefore I am accepted as well and entitled come before that throne of grace myself. The Ascended Shepherd prays for us and ensures that whenever we fall, we are picked back up and set back on the right path once again.

7. Joy!

Let's read the account of the Lord's ascension found in Luke's Gospel,

Then He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, 'Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.' And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His

hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen (Luke 24:44-53).

This account describes how the ascension of Jesus produced three interconnected things:

1. Great joy,
2. Worship, and
3. Praise.

Previously, when Jesus had spoken about going away, the disciples had been filled with sorrow, now they are filled with “great joy.” There was joy that Jesus was returning to His Father, joy that the Holy Spirit was coming soon, and joy that the good news of the Gospel was about to go out to “all nations.” It is said that the disciples worshipped Jesus. Worship is an expression of the greatness and worthiness we find in God. The disciples recognised that the Messiah they had been following was truly God. This caused both joy and worship. As we follow the Ascended Shepherd and see how great He is, we will find that our hearts are filled with great joy and that this overflows into worship.

As well as hearts filled with worship, the disciples had lips occupied with praise. They praised God, thanking Him for sending His Son into this world. No doubt they also praised God for the incredible blessings that Jesus’ death and resurrection had won for them. The disciples can have only had a sketchy understanding at this point of all the blessings that Jesus had won for them. We are much better placed to understand and appreciate all that Jesus has done and is doing for us. Therefore we should take every opportunity to praise and worship such a Great Shepherd.

8. Our Commission

The section I have just quoted from Luke speaks about the disciples as Jesus’ witnesses. The parallel section in Matthew, often called The Great Commission reads, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19,20). On the same theme of witness, John 20:21 quotes Jesus as saying to the disciples, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” So, the Ascended Shepherd not only gathers us in, but He also sends us out!

The disciples had been sent out two by two when Jesus was with them, but this was something new. With the Lord returning to heaven, the work was now committed to His followers. Of course they were not being left to their own resources. We have already thought about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the presence of the Lord with us, the power of heaven behind us, and the Divine Intercessor speaking to the Father for us. It is His church and His work, but He has sent His own into the world so that He can work through them, or rather through us if we belong to Him. Without the Ascended Shepherd alongside us such a commission and sending would be overwhelmingly beyond us, but He has promised to be always there with us, “Even to the end of the age.”

Preparing for Work

I said at the beginning that the purpose of the Great Shepherd is to prepare us for every good work to do His will. So how does the Ascended Shepherd do that? Let’s briefly go back through the eight things that Christ’s ascension produces or promises.

The coming of the Holy Spirit

How else could we be empowered for good works and to do His will? Our Ascended Shepherd did not send the Spirit to enable us to do as we please! He went to heaven so that the Spirit might come to strengthen us to live as He lived in this world.

Worldwide presence and power

The Ascended Shepherd oversees a worldwide church, but the Bible still refers to it as one body. His church is meant to work together, using all the gifts that He gives to those He places in it, to achieve His work in this world. To return to the picture of a flock of sheep; we are not meant to act independently but to undertake the responsibilities given specifically to us, to help feed, encourage, and add to that flock.

The power of heaven engaged for us

Our Ascended Shepherd has all the power of heaven at His disposal and is willing to use it for us. But it is the kind of power that produces His own characteristics in those that it puts to work. This Shepherd wants to change us into His image while He uses us for His work.

Christ's return for us

Christians live with a countdown to a date that is unknown. It might be the date of our individual homecall, or it might be the date of the Lord's return. Either way, our time is limited and should be used wisely. The Ascended Shepherd has a path which He wants to lead us along, with tasks to perform and lessons to learn, some of which we cannot even imagine at the moment. We need to be ready to walk with Him until that path is completed.

A home prepared for us

The end of the pathway is our own home – our eternal home. Jesus told the disciples, "Where I go you know, and the way you know" (John 14:4). Our home is the Shepherd's own home, and He is the way to it. I don't think that heaven will be a place that we find strange or daunting, like walking into a posh house where we have never been before and don't know anybody. I think it is a place where we will feel immediately at home. The Ascended Shepherd is there now, ready to welcome us. We can work hard here knowing that we will rest and be rewarded there.

An Intercessor in heaven

Before Peter denied the Lord, Jesus told him that He had prayed for Him and that when he was restored Peter was to strengthen his brethren. That prayer was made by Jesus on earth, but now He intercedes for us in heaven. Like Peter, we sometimes fail in our responsibilities and obedience, but the Ascended Shepherd prays for us so that we might be restored and take up our work again.

Joy!

At times, the Christian life can seem like a difficult slog, and joy feels a million miles away. We need to fix our eyes on the Shepherd in heaven and rejoice at the fact that He is there where He belongs and where He is fully valued, just like the disciples had great joy at His ascension. Joy is a much more powerful stimulus to "every good work" than dogged determination will ever be!

Our commission

In a sense, our commission defines the good works we are to do. It also reminds us that we are personally responsible to the Person who commissioned us. Our Ascended Shepherd certainly doesn't leave us alone to undertake the task He has given us a share in completing. He has not departed for heaven and left us to our own devices! We are called to work alongside Him as well as alongside our fellow-servants. He is the great Overseer of the whole work, but also the One ready to support and strengthen the most obscure participant in the undertaking.

Conclusion

What a lovely thing it is to remember that we have a Great Shepherd who cares for us and will lead us all the way home, even carrying us when that is necessary. We all carry far too many cares and burdens with us as we follow Him through this world. Peter's exhortation, from 1 Peter 5:7, is always worth remembering. "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you," said Peter, reminding us that the Great Shepherd cares about us deeply and is willing to take our cares from us. Not only that, but He is also far more capable of dealing with them than we are! Our Shepherd stands ready to provide, shelter, food and drink for our souls, protection, rest and much more besides. He is ascended to the highest place, but still right by my side every step of the way. He is truly a Great Shepherd and well worth following, trusting, and obeying.

Lord Jesus. Thank you that You look after us like the wandering, helpless sheep that we are. Not only did you step in to save us, but You have undertaken to take each one of us safely home to be with You. Teach us to make our journeys easier and happier by learning to trust you implicitly and take You at your word. Amen.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk in the series The Great Shepherd, The Ascended Shepherd, talk number T1451.

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