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**Sunday 25 April to Sunday 2 May**

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Sunday 25 April 2021

# Jesus, be my shepherd

by Nick and Brian Schwarz

**I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:11).**

Read John 10:11–18

Christians love the image of Jesus, the good shepherd, tenderly caring for his sheep and lambs. The sheep and lambs represent us, of course. The image inspires us to trust in Jesus’ protection, guidance and provision. It is of special comfort to Christians who are ‘walking through the valley of the shadow of death’, such as soldiers and civilians in wartime, people in the midst of a pandemic, people nearing the end of their lives, and people mourning the death of loved ones.

Sheep in need of a good shepherd are all around us. Some decided they could look after themselves and wandered, lost their way and are vulnerable and hungry. Some followed other shepherds who didn’t really love them and turned out to be predators in disguise. Some are not yet ready or receptive to a call to follow Jesus.

But many are ready and receptive. They discovered that following their own desires led them into the wilderness. They now realise that one path is actually not as good as any other, and they are seeking the right and true path and a trustworthy guide.

Such sheep are open to receiving the good news that they have a shepherd who knows them, loves them, sacrificed himself to save them, and wants to lead them from their wilderness to a life of true abundance.

How well the old song expresses this life:

I am Jesus’ little lamb
Ever glad at heart I am.
For my shepherd gently guides me,
Knows my need and well provides me,
Loves me every day the same,
Even calls me by my name.

**Dear Lord, help us to recognise ‘sheep’ who are ready to be invited into your flock or back into it again. Help us to live in ways that make joining your flock seem to them like the obvious and right thing to do. Help us to look after our fellow sheep so that they will grow strong and remain in your care. Amen.**

Monday 26 April 2021

# Shepherding others

by Nick and Brian Schwarz

**Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? (Ezekiel 34:2).**

Read Ezekiel 34:1–16

In the days of the prophet Ezekiel, the kings and senior government officials of the people of Israel were corrupt and self-serving. They failed to set a good example for their people. Many of Israel’s religious leaders also failed in their duty as spiritual shepherds.

In our day, too, corruption and scandal shadow leaders in every area of life: politics and government, business, sport, schools and other institutions, churches, charities and family homes. They abuse their power or fail in their duty to set a good example and guide, protect and provide for those for whom they are responsible. When shepherds don’t shepherd properly, their sheep suffer. They lose faith in their shepherds, wander off on their own, and find themselves lost or in harm’s way. At that point, they are prone to attaching themselves to anyone or anything – even wolves in disguise – that might relieve their misery and provide direction, security and sustenance.

Jesus called Peter, Paul and other apostles to ‘feed his sheep’ and bring them into God’s sheepfold. Through their shepherding, Gentiles like us became part of his flock. In the same way, Jesus calls each of us also to be shepherds of people around us – our children and grandchildren, our students in our schools, our friends and neighbours, our workmates, our customers or clients, our patients, our carers, our teammates and our opponents – to help them to realise that being a part of Jesus’ flock is the best thing that could ever happen to them.

Let us pray for God’s help to live out our calling as shepherds.

**Thank you, Jesus, our Good Shepherd, for loving us so much and wanting us so much to be part of your flock that you sacrificed your life for us. Give us courage, determination, persistence, winsomeness and other good qualities that will help us to shepherd people around us so that they, too, might become part of your eternal flock. Amen.**

Tuesday 27 April 2021

# God values everyone

by Nick and Brian Schwarz

**See that you do not despise one of these little ones (Matthew 18:10).**

Read Matthew 18:10–14

We humans have a tendency to rank other people according to what we think they are worth. We rank highly those who are rich, powerful, learned or famous. And we rank lowly those who are poor, unimportant, uneducated or insignificant. And the way we treat them reflects their ranking. We show a lot of respect and care for those who are highly ranked and much less to those who are lowly ranked.

Not so with God. All people have great value in God’s eyes. He made them all. He gave his one and only Son, Jesus, to redeem them all. So when anyone turns away from God and does their own thing, God’s heart grieves. And like a loving shepherd, he goes looking for his lost sheep to restore them to his flock.

God wants those of us who know him as Father to act like caring shepherds to brothers and sisters who stray from him. Rather than ignoring them or giving them the cold shoulder, God wants us to pray for them, lovingly approach them and seek to draw them back to their Good Shepherd.

When any one of the lost is found and returns to God’s flock, all of heaven rejoices. And when you play a part in bringing one of the lost ones back home, you will have great joy too.

**Dear God, help us to see others as you see them, as people to be loved. Please help us to bring followers who have strayed back home, and to bring people who have never known you into your loving embrace. Amen.**

Wednesday 28 April 2021

# Recognising God’s voice

by Nick and Brian Schwarz

**My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no-one will snatch them out of my hand (John 10:27,28).**

Read John 10:22–30

A visitor to Israel, observing a shepherd leading a flock of sheep, once conducted an experiment. He put on the shepherd’s cloak, took hold of the shepherd’s crook and called the sheep to follow him. But the sheep just ignored him. Why? Because what they heard was a strange voice. Even though the man now looked somewhat like their shepherd, they recognised that he was a fake, an impostor. He was not to be trusted like their real shepherd – the one who knew them intimately, who cared for them daily and was prepared to sacrifice his life to keep them safe.

Sadly, there are pastors, teachers and leaders who masquerade as shepherds of God’s flock but whose voices sound different to that of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Rather than stressing what God has done for us through Jesus, they emphasise what you must do to win God’s favour. Rather than giving glory to Jesus, they tend to seek glory for themselves. Rather than acting as humble servants, they act like proud bosses.

False shepherds can do great damage to God’s flock. Beware of them. Become so familiar with the voice of Jesus that you can quickly detect the difference between those who are genuine shepherds and those who are not.

**Dear God, we thank you for shepherds whose voices are in tune with the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Bless them. Help us to become so familiar with Jesus’ voice that we can quickly recognise true shepherds from imposters. Amen.**

Thursday 29 April 2021

# Keeping watch

by Nick and Brian Schwarz

**Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God (Acts 20:28).**

Read Acts 20:25–38

Caring for and guiding other Christians is an awesome responsibility. You are entrusted with people who are so precious to God that Jesus, the Son of God, shed his blood for them on the cross. So precious and yet so vulnerable.

Dangers abound for the flock of God, both from within the church and from without. From without, some attack the church, its beliefs and teachings about holy living. From within, some distort the truth of the gospel to win followers for themselves. They are like savage wolves who destroy the unity of the church.

Those who are leaders in the church need to practise constant vigilance. They need to keep watch, first over themselves – over their own faith and Christian life – and second, to keep watch over those in their care. Keeping a careful watch flows from being familiar with what is happening in the lives of the flock and prayerful reflection on what you observe there and in your own life. Are you setting a good example for those you are leading?

**Lord God, please bless people in leadership in our church. Give them your Spirit so that they lead in wise and loving ways. Help me to set a good example for my fellow church members. Amen.**

Friday 30 April 2021

# Resisting shepherding fatigue

by Nick and Brian Schwarz

**Tend the flock of God that is your charge (1 Peter 5:2b).**

Read 1 Peter 5:1–7

Caring for other Christians can be frustrating and tiring. Just as some sheep disregard the voice of shepherds and wander off into danger, so some Christians ignore the guidance of their pastors and leaders.

What keeps you going when this happens? Only the compassion and care of Christ. For all of us, he laid aside his glory. For all of us, he gave up his life on the cross. His compassion and care is the fountain from which you can drink deeply to receive refreshment and new strength to continue caring for difficult and wayward Christians.

Caring for other Christians is not always rewarding. While many Christians express appreciation and gratitude for pastoral care, some are ungrateful and constantly critical. Here St Peter assures you that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, recognises the care you give to his flock and will reward you with an unfading crown of glory when he appears.

**Dear Lord, help us never to tire of praying for the spiritual wellbeing of fellow Christians. Give us insight into the readiness of those who have wandered away to hear your call to them again. Amen.**

Saturday 1 May 2021

# God reigns

by Nick and Brian Schwarz

**For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations (Psalm 22:28).**

Read Psalm 22:25–31

Most of the news that you get via the media is bad news. It is about the pandemic, trade wars, fires, floods, accidents or murders. If you were guided simply by the news, you could only be pessimistic about the future.

Thankfully, we have the Good News as well as the news. The Good News assures us that God has not abandoned the world he has made. Though the world is in a mess brought about by human rebellion against the Creator, God still reigns and has sent Jesus to deal with sin and bring the nations to repentance, faith and obedience.

Here are a couple of songs that can fill us with hope and lift our spirits when things look bleak:

This is my Father’s world,
O let me ne’er forget,
that though the wrong seems e’er so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.

This is my Father’s world;
Why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is King, let the heavens ring.
God reigns; let the earth be glad.

And:

He is Lord, he is Lord.
He is risen from the dead and he is Lord.
Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess
That Jesus Christ is Lord.

**Lord, our God, please bless us with the peace of mind that comes with knowing you are Lord and that whatever happens, we are in your loving arms. Amen.**

Sunday 2 May 2021

# Connection

by Ruth Olsen

**I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower … you are the branches (John 15:1,5).**

Read John 15:1–8

This passage might be quite familiar to you. So much can be gleaned from it as the Holy Spirit draws attention to diverse aspects over time. It’s like the process of growing in a relationship and bearing fruit!

What is the relationship here between the true vine and the vinegrower? Isn’t a vine planted by the vinegrower and dependent on the vinegrower for its needs? In most vineyards, pruning would usually happen every year at a designated time. And that pruning can look rather severe. Each year new growth will come on the branches that will, in due time, bear more fruit if the conditions are suitable. Without a connection to the vine, though, a branch is useless, and, in fact, soon dead!

So what’s the connection between the true vine (Jesus), the vinegrower (the Father) and the branches (followers of Jesus)? Relationship. Intimacy. Interdependency, and more. It’s already present between Jesus, the Father and the Spirit. Amazingly, that is what we are grafted into – that relationship between the God-head. Earlier Jesus said, ‘the Father will give you another Counselor, the Spirit [who] lives with you and will be in you. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you’ (John 14:16–20).

Our connection, in and through Jesus, abiding and remaining in him in the richness of relationship, means his life flows in us and then overflows, available to others through ‘fruit that we bear’. All of this is to the Father’s glory! But why pruning? ‘So that it will be even more fruitful’ (verses 2,8 NIV). Jesus desires to give glory to the Father through our bearing much fruit in likeness to him.

Have you been aware of the Father doing pruning in your life? If we are wise, such pruning will prompt us to draw in very close to Jesus and draw deeply from him. In the process, we are renewed and nurtured, and in time, we produce more fruit that tastes of him.

**Holy Spirit, thank you that you are patiently and persistently nurturing, shaping and training me each day, making me more like Jesus. Keep it coming, please. Amen.**