

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from Bible birds: The Eagle - the strength of God

Have you ever seen an eagle in the wild? It is something I would love to see. Eagles are majestic, noble birds. Like lions, they are often found on flags and heraldry and national emblems - for example, in times past the eagle was used as a symbol of the Roman Empire, and modern day examples include the bald eagle which is the national bird of the United States. Eagles are swift, far-sighted, and powerful - birds to be admired. They are also mentioned many times in the Bible. Or are they? The word used in the Old Testament is *neshar*, which is translated as "eagle" in our English Bibles. It is not absolutely clear what the identity of the *neshar* is - some think that it refers to another large and majestic bird, the griffon vulture. Back in 1867, HB Tristram published a book called "*The Natural History of the Bible*" (ISBN: 9780543890030). He outlines a number of reasons as to why the Bible bird *neshar* is the griffon vulture. I was interested to see the same identification of *neshar* in a Jewish website called "Zoo Torah" where the author, Rabbi Nossan Slifkin says about the griffon vulture that "this spectacular bird has a wingspan that can measure eight feet and is the most magnificent bird of prey in Israel." According to Tristram, the griffon vulture was the emblem and standard of Persia.

It would be nice to know exactly which bird is being referred to by the word *neshar*, as this would help us to better understand the beautiful illustrations in the Bible that we are going to consider. However, whether we think of a noble eagle or the magnificent griffon vulture, the verses that mention this bird give us some very precious insights into the character of God as our powerful Protector. In particular, I would like to consider one passage in Deuteronomy as the main theme for today's talk. In Deuteronomy 32:9-12 we read, "*For the LORD'S portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land and in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young, spreading out its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings, so the LORD alone led him, and there was no foreign god with him.*" This passage brings to mind a beautiful picture of a caring parent bird that protects and helps its young, and also teaches and develops them. What I would like to bring out today is that this picture is a picture of God's care, and that we can and we should fully trust in God, for He has the power and the love and care to support us and protect us. We're going to look at references to the eagle in the light of this proposition.

The first time that the eagle is mentioned in the Bible is in Exodus 19:4. The children of Israel had been brought out of Egypt and into the wilderness of Sinai. Moses was shortly about to receive the Ten Commandments from God (see Exodus 20:1-17). In Exodus 19:4-5 we read, "*You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine.*" This is similar to the passage that we read earlier in Deuteronomy. God is telling Moses that, just like a strong and caring parent eagle, He has safely carried the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and that He is bringing them into a relationship with Himself.

In his book that I mentioned earlier, HB Tristram writes about the care of birds for their young. He says, "The pains which all birds of prey take in encouraging their young ones to fly, and in coaxing them to leave the nest, is well known to all who have observed them. The account given by Sir H. Davy of his watching a pair of golden eagles thus occupied has been often quoted. 'I once saw a very interesting sight above the crags of Ben Nevis. Two patient eagles were teaching their offspring, two young birds, the manoeuvres of flight. They began by rising from the top of the mountain, in the eye of the sun. It was about mid-day, and bright for the climate. They at first made small circles, and the young birds imitated them. They paused on their wings, waiting till they had made their flight, and then took a second and larger gyration, always rising towards the sun, and enlarging their circle of flight, so as to make a gradually ascending spiral. The young ones still and slowly followed, apparently flying better as they mounted; and they continued this sublime exercise, always rising, till they became mere points in the air, and the young ones were lost, and afterwards their parents, to our aching sight.'"

If this is the care that, through instinct, parent eagles show their offspring, then how much more God's care is for us! The illustrations of the eagle that God uses in His Word are there to teach us about His Fatherly care of us. A young bird will feel safe with a parent who has both the power and the instinct to protect and support. We can feel safe, too, knowing that this is what God is like.

Now of course, the passages that we read in Exodus 19:4-5 and in Deuteronomy 32:9-12 were primarily spoken to God's people Israel. Can we also take comfort in such expressions? Yes, we can. For a start, Romans 15:4 tells us that, *"whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope."* Not all of Scripture is about us, but all of it is for us in some sense, so we can be encouraged by this picture of God's character in the Old Testament. The eagle, or the griffon vulture, would have been pretty much "the king of birds", and so it is a fitting illustration of a powerful and protecting parent. In similar vein, Romans 8:31 says that *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* and Romans 8:38-39 say *"For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Most interestingly, we find the eagle in the Bible's descriptions of God's presence. There is a very interesting passage in the book of the prophet Ezekiel that mentions the eagle. Ezekiel 1 starts quite abruptly with Ezekiel seeing visions of God. Ezekiel 1:1 says, *"Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the River Chebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God."* Ezekiel saw some remarkable visions that he described and recorded for us. He saw a vision of the throne of God itself, as if supported on a chariot, and surrounded by heavenly creatures that he simply calls "living creatures". Ezekiel 1:5-6 say *"also from within it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. Each one had four faces, and each one had four wings."* In Ezekiel 1:10, Ezekiel tells us about the faces of these living creatures. He says, *"as for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of a man; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right side, each of the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and each of the four had the face of an eagle."*

Now what is interesting is that we have a similar description right at the end of the Bible, in the Revelation, which records what the Apostle John wrote after he also had been given a vision of heaven. In Revelation 4:2 John says, *"Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne."* Then in Revelation 4:6-7 he says, *"Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle."*

Both Ezekiel and John saw living creatures that surrounded God's throne, and they described them as having characteristics of a lion, a calf or an ox, a man, and an eagle. One assumes therefore that these four characteristics must somehow illustrate God's character. Now, it may be that these illustrations were given many years ago, even before Ezekiel, because Alfred Edersheim in his book on Bible history (ISBN: 9781565631656) says that, according to Jewish tradition, when the Israelites camped in the wilderness while they were journeying to the promised land, the four leading tribes had banners with the same emblems as Ezekiel's living creatures. Judah would have had a lion on its standard, Reuben would have had a man, Ephraim would have had the head of a bullock, that is, an ox, and Dan would have had an eagle. Whether this was so or not, the Bible does not specify, but it is interesting nonetheless. As I said earlier, no doubt the lion, man, ox and eagle represent certain attributes of God. We would need to look carefully at how these animals are mentioned in the Bible to get an idea of what they might represent. Since we are focussing on the eagle, let's look at how the Bible characterises eagles.

We have already considered their care for their young. Another attribute that the Bible mentions is that they are swift. I will quote three passages from the Old Testament that illustrate this.

1. When David lamented the death of Saul and Jonathan, he said, *"Saul and Jonathan were beloved and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions"* (2 Samuel 1:23).
2. When Job was complaining about all his troubles, he said, *"Now my days are swifter than a runner; they flee away, they see no good. They pass by like swift ships, like an eagle swooping on its prey"* (Job 9:25-26).
3. Jeremiah, in his Lamentations, says, *"Our pursuers were swifter than the eagles of the heavens. They pursued us on the mountains and lay in wait for us in the wilderness"* (Lamentations 4:19).

All of these verses highlight the swiftness of the eagle. God is swift to help us, too. It reminds me of the hymn by Henry Lyte, "Praise my soul the King of Heaven". One of the verses says:

*“Praise Him for His grace and favour
 To our fathers in distress;
 Praise Him still the same as ever,
 Slow to chide, and swift to bless:
 Alleluia! Alleluia!
 Glorious in His faithfulness.”*

It's a most encouraging thought - "slow to chide and swift to bless".

We also find that the Bible speaks of the eagle's excellent vision. If we go again to the book of Job, but this time with God speaking, we read, *“Does the eagle mount up at your command, and make its nest on high? On the rock it dwells and resides, on the crag of the rock and the stronghold. From there it spies out the prey; its eyes observe from afar. Its young ones suck up blood; and where the slain are, there it is.”* (Job 39:27-30).

Eagles are known to have good eyesight. We use the term “eagle-eyed” when we are speaking of sharp vision, or being able to spot things. According to the Wikipedia page for “eagle eye”, eagles could apparently spot something the size of a rabbit from two miles away! The point for us to take away is that God sees perfectly - He sees the end from the beginning, He sees the challenges that await us, He knows what we will need in our Christian pathway.

Another attribute of both eagles and griffon vultures are the heights that they inhabit. We saw that in the quote from Job just earlier: *“Does the eagle mount up at your command, and make its nest on high?”* (Job 39:27). There are various comments on the internet about Ruppell's griffon vulture, presumably a similar bird to the Biblical *nesher*, as being a bird that can fly very high. A web page from the Smithsonian Zoo website mentions this bird is the highest flying bird on record, and was apparently spotted in Africa at an altitude of over 37,000 feet! That is well over the height of Mount Everest! It is the sort of altitude at which planes fly!

Eagles of course are also known to make their nests high up on rocky crags. Whatever the bird mentioned in the Bible is, whether eagle or griffon vulture, we have a good natural illustration of one dwelling on high - a good picture of our Heavenly Father.

Now, we have looked at some of the good features of the eagle, but we should note that not all the Bible references to eagles are so positive. The eagle was one of the birds that was not to be eaten under Jewish law. Leviticus 11:13 states, *“and these you shall regard as an abomination among the birds; they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: the eagle, the vulture, the buzzard ...”* Aside from spiritual illustrations, this prohibition may well have been partly due to the fact that these birds ate carrion, or dead prey, especially if the bird referred to really is the griffon vulture. In Luke 17:36-37, when the Lord Jesus was teaching about the last days, He said *“Two men will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left.”* The disciples asked the Lord where the other would be left, and He replied, *“wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.”*

Notwithstanding these less positive illustrations of the eagle's character, it seems reasonable that it is the positive attributes of the eagle, or of the griffon vulture, which are meant to illustrate God's care for us: His power, His concern for His own, His swiftness to help, His far-sightedness. Other animals in the Bible are also used in both positive and negative ways.

Like the eagle, the raven was considered an abomination in terms of food in the Old Testament - it was also listed as one of the birds that should not be eaten. However, we have a very positive instance of ravens, when they brought bread and meat for the prophet Elijah (see 1 Kings 17:4-7). The Lord Jesus Himself used them as an example of God's care. *“Consider the ravens”,* He said in Luke 12:24, *“for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds?”*

The lion is also used in both positive and negative ways in the Bible. For example, the lion is a symbol of the Lord Jesus - He is called the *“Lion of the tribe of Judah”* in Revelation 5:5, whereas the Devil is also likened to a lion by the Apostle Peter in his first epistle: *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”* (1 Peter 5:8).

Summing up so far then, we can see that the eagle in the Bible gives us a beautiful picture of God's care. The eagle, like God, is powerful, swift, far-sighted, and cares for its own. As I said at the start, we can and we should fully trust in God, for He has the power and the love and care to support us and protect us.

Quite a few of these ideas come together in a beautiful passage towards the end of Isaiah. In Isaiah 40:27-31, we read: *“Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel: ‘My way is hidden from the LORD, and my just claim is passed over by my God’? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the weak, and to*

those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

If we wait on the LORD, we too can become in some way like eagles. We will have our strength renewed. Just as the eagle soars on high, we too can "*mount up with wings like eagles*", overcoming our problems through God's strength.

I'd like to close by going back to that quote from Tristram's book about the parent eagles teaching their young: "The young ones still and slowly followed, apparently flying better as they mounted; and they continued this sublime exercise, always rising, till they became mere points in the air, and the young ones were lost, and afterwards their parents, to our aching sight." Let's trust in God who will give us the strength to "*mount up with wings like eagles, to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint.*"

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