

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Lessons from Bible birds: The Hen - the protection of God

After a fierce forest fire some exhausted fire-fighters were walking slowly back to their vehicles through the burnt ground of what had been a farmyard. One of them noticed something sticking up from the ground and as he passed by he kicked over the unusual charred remains. To his complete surprise, underneath the object he had kicked away were three or four little chicks still alive. The charred remains were all that was left of a hen. As the fire had raged towards her, the mother hen had gathered her chicks and simply waited for the flames to pass as she protected her brood under her wings. The fire had spread so quickly the hen was engulfed and destroyed in the flames, but her burnt body had remained in place as the fire swept through the farmyard. Amazingly the tiny chicks had been saved beneath the wings of their mother.

We often think of protection being provided by a strong army or by a brave soldier. We don't think of a domesticated bird, which on the face of it seems so timid, being associated with such courage, but hens are very protective of their young. If you approach a hen and her chicks, she will often gather them under her wings; if you get too close, the hen will become aggressive and start to peck.

Several times in the Old Testament, wings are used to illustrate God's care and protection for His people. In Deuteronomy 32:9-12 eagle's wings describe how God carried His people through the wilderness: *"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."*

When Boaz, King David's great grandfather, first met Ruth, his future wife, he encouraged her by saying, *"The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge"* (Ruth 2:12).

In the Psalms there are several references to the "wings of God":

- *"Keep me as the apple of your eye; Hide me in the shadow of your wings"* (Psalm 17:8).
- *"How precious is your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of your wings"* (Psalm 36:7).
- *"He shall cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you shall take refuge"* (Psalm 91:4).

So it is no great surprise that when Jesus looks over the city of Jerusalem He would express the feelings of His heart with these words: *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see me no more till you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!'"* (Matthew 23:37-39).

These words of Jesus were prophetic as they foretold the future judgment of the nation of Israel. He speaks specifically about the city of Jerusalem and its coming destruction. He reminds the city, as representative of Israel's kings and rulers, of its rejection of the word of God and the murder of the prophets God had sent to call its people to repentance. He explains that it was His desire to gather them and protect them as a hen gathers her chicks (see Matthew 23:37).

Jesus, however, surprisingly uses the hen to describe the **power** of protection. This power had been manifested to God's people down the centuries. It had been seen in the lives of the patriarchs:

- God had protected Abraham in Egypt;
- He had protected Jacob in the house of Laban;
- He had protected Joseph against his own brothers and the injustices of Potiphar's house and the state prison;
- He had protected the infant nation in slavery in Egypt;
- He had protected the people on the Passover night;

- He had protected the nation for 40 years in the wilderness;
- This protection had continued in the Promised Land under the judges and kings.

Of course, there had been times when the people had disobeyed God and judgment had come upon them, but God had always sought to bring them back into blessing. His protection extended to them even in exile, ultimately ensuring that the people returned to the land He had promised them.

This is the protection David wrote about in numerous Psalms. David used various descriptions of the LORD: a fortress, rock, high tower (Psalm 144:1-2). He also described the LORD as a shepherd (Psalm 23:1) and, as we have seen, as the majestic soaring eagle and the common flightless hen.

But when Jesus speaks about protection He emphasises a protection which is not only powerful but also gentle and comforting. The Bible describes the characteristics of God in the most diverse ways. The power of God is undoubted. He is the almighty creator able to save, in the words of Jonathan, *“by few or many”*: *“Then Jonathan said to the young man who bore his armour, ‘Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the LORD will work for us. For nothing restrains the LORD from saving by many or by few’”* (1 Samuel 14:6).

Jonathan’s faith went on to prove the power of God when he overcame the Philistine garrison (see 1 Samuel 14:1-23). Soon afterwards David demonstrated the same truth when he, by God’s power, defeated Goliath in the valley of Elah (see 1 Samuel 17:1-57). God showed He was all-powerful by humbling Pharaoh to release the Children of Israel from Egypt (see Exodus 12:30). He showed He was all-powerful by humbling Nebuchadnezzar who had taken the Children of Israel into exile in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar says, *“I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured him who lives forever: For his dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain his hand Or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’”* (Daniel 4:34-35).

This was the God the Children of Israel recognised and wanted to see demonstrate such power again. Even as Jesus was about to go back to heaven His disciples ask Him, *“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”* (Acts 1:6).

But in Matthew 23:37 Jesus was speaking about aspects of the protection of God that the Jews of His day, with the exception of a few, did not understand and which many people today fail to understand. He spoke of the gentleness and comfort of the protection of God. These characteristics of God were fully expressed in the Person of Christ, the Son of God. In fact, Jesus speaks as God in Matthew 23:37-39 when He says, *“How often I would have gathered you...”* (as in the Authorised Version). I think this expression refers not only to the circumstances existing when Christ was in the world but also to the many times in past history when God sought to gather His people for their protection. Jesus’ words provide evidence of the existence of the Son of God before He came to earth. Other Scriptures confirm this, for example, *“Then the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM’”* (John 8:57-58).

To the Jews of Jesus’ day the God revealed in the Old Testament to the nation of Israel was the God of Sinai. He was the One who gave the law to Moses and dwelt behind the veil of the tabernacle and temple. He was the God who could only be approached by sacrifice and priest. God was amongst His people but distant from them in His holiness. The only way they could express their relationship to God was by priding themselves that they were a chosen people and by maintaining a self-righteousness which hid spiritual emptiness.

Yet some of their forefathers had discovered the gentleness of God, men like Jacob who, at the end of his life, spoke of God’s protection and gentle shepherd care: *“And he blessed Joseph, and said: ‘God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The God who has fed [or shepherded] me all my life long to this day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads; Let my name be named upon them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; And let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth’”* Genesis 48:15-16).

Later, David describes the gentle protection of God when he famously writes of the LORD as his shepherd in Psalm 23:1. We sometimes refer to protective acts being for the good of people when the acts themselves might be unpleasant. We will say to our children, when we are grounding them for some reason, *“This is for your own good.”* But God’s protection is not only about salvation in the sense of being saved from judgment or difficult circumstances, it is also about the relationship salvation brings us into. Jesus describes these features of God’s salvation in the most endearing ways in the picture of the hen. He speaks of His feelings of love and tenderness towards His people, His desire to bring them into the closest relationship with Himself and His sadness when all His appeals are rejected.

The words, *“How often”* reveal the feelings of God’s heart and His constant desire to bring us into blessing. The words, *“I would have gathered you”*, Matthew 23:37 (again, as the Authorised Version) reveal the desire of God to

bring His people closer to Himself and, in so doing, closer to each other. This is seen in relation to Christ's church in John 10 where Jesus says, *"I am the good shepherd; and I know my sheep, and am known by my own. As the Father knows me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And 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"* (John 10:14-16).

Here Jesus is describing "bringing" or "gathering" the two different groups of believers, Jewish and Gentile, the two folds, into one flock - His church.

The words, "under her wings" in Matthew 23:37-39 reveal a protection which is based upon His Person. It is hard to think of an expression which better describes the closeness and love God has towards His people. My office is in a visitor centre in an internationally important area for birds. I often have to walk through flocks of birds to get to the door of the building. One of the most wonderful sights on our wetlands is to see mute swan cygnets when they get a little tired scrambling onto their mum's back. After they are all aboard, she will cover them with her wings and glide through the water. If natural forces on earth and in the universe demonstrate the power of a creator beyond our comprehension, the tiny details within nature serve to show the creator's care and gentleness.

Finally, the words, *"but you would not..."*, Matthew 23:37 (as in the Authorised Version) reveal the pain of God when He is rejected; when, as we find at the beginning of John's Gospel, *"He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him"* (John 1:10-11).

When Jesus spoke of the behaviour of the hen, He was conveying the immensity of God's love by the behaviour of one of his smallest and most timid of creatures.

It is remarkable that on occasions God uses the actions of wildlife to make people think about their own understanding of God. We have mentioned the wings of eagles already. In Exodus they are used again to describe God's deliverance: *"And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself'"* (Exodus 19:3-4).

Interestingly they are also used to describe the liberating experience of those who wait on the LORD: *"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"* (Isaiah 40:31).

In the extraordinary story of Balaam and his ass in Numbers 22:22-40, we see the corrupt prophet instructed by an animal normally associated with stubbornness. Without going into the detail of the story it highlights how the pride of men is challenged by the intelligence of animals we consider dumb. God's creation testifies to the creator.

Jesus explains this further when He rebukes the Pharisees in Luke 19:37-40, by using an object which had no life at all - a stone! *"Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, saying: 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD!' Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!' And some of the Pharisees called to him from the crowd, 'Teacher, rebuke your disciples.' But he answered and said to them, 'I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out'"* (Luke 19:37-40).

In Jonah 1 God uses the great fish to protect and teach Jonah under the sea. Then in Jonah 4, He uses a tiny worm to make Jonah understand the mercy of God. At the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17) the dove is used as a manifestation of the Spirit of God. Jesus uses sheep as an illustration of his disciples (John 10:7-16). When he rides a colt which had never been ridden (see Mark 11:1-11), He proves His power over His own creation. In Revelation 5:5 Jesus is described as the Lion of the tribe of Judah and then in Revelation 5:6 as a Lamb as it had been freshly slain.

All of these references to animals and nature provide illustrations of the character God and the Lord Jesus and their relationship with the people of God.

In today's example, the Lord Jesus teaches us about the nature of God's protection through the maternal behaviour of a hen towards her chicks. The illustration implies sacrifice. The bird instinctively stands between danger and her chicks. She covers them under her wings. All the features of this most common of birds vividly illustrate the most powerful aspects of Christ work. He came to be our sacrifice, our substitute, the one who would stand in our place. Elsewhere He describes Himself as *"the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep"* (John 10:11).

Sacrifice and nearness are at the very heart of Christianity. Our redemption cost the life of Christ. This is illustrated in different ways. It is seen in the Lord Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He says, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep"* (John 10:11) It is seen in the Lord Jesus as the Lamb of God, *"Behold! The*

*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29)

These are well known pictures of the redeeming Saviour. What is striking about them is that we would not immediately think of the lamb or the shepherd as obvious protectors. Yet in Genesis 22:1-19, in the story Abraham and Isaac, Abraham tells his son that God would provide Himself a lamb for sacrifice (Genesis 22:8) and later finds a ram caught in a thicket by its horns (Genesis 22:13). The ram's horns were a picture of its power. The thicket was reminder of the curse the earth suffered because of sin. Together they illustrate a coming Christ who by the sacrifice of Himself would deal once and for all with the consequences of man's disobedience.

Equally when David spoke to King Saul about protecting his father's sheep as a young shepherd he told him about how he had killed a lion and a bear (1 Samuel 17:34-37). These acts of bravery equipped him to meet the great giant Goliath and save his people from the Philistines (1 Samuel 17:48-51).

When we look carefully at these vivid pastoral images we see expressions of the strength, power and sacrifice of Christ. What is even more amazing is that Jesus would choose such a fragile creature as a hen to explain the protection and love God. Yet hidden in this illustration are remarkable reminders of the features of the power and presence of God. God's power was not displayed with armies and angels but in the lowliness and apparent weakness of the lowly Nazarene. The Saviour brings life through dying, salvation through suffering, richness through poverty. He becomes tiny to express the greatest power. At the same time he draws us into a relationship which provides an eternal security centred in Him. The closeness of the chicks to their mother within the covering of her wings has touching parallels to a phrase commonly used by Paul when he describes Christians as being "in Christ". The Christian's salvation and life is founded upon the salvation and life of Christ. It is a life to be possessed and enjoyed now and in eternity.

May we know the power of nearness to Christ now and be assured of His keeping power and grace into the future.

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