

# The Eagle



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## THE EAGLE

As a boy, I was lying on my back one day in the woods in the Finger Lakes region of New York State, drinking in the beauty of nature. As I looked up through the foliage of the trees around me, I noticed a stirring overhead. Lo and behold, a bald eagle was resting on one of the upper branches, and not having seen one before, I marveled at this bird. In fact, the experience was so impressive that it left an indelible print on my mind. Years later I realized that the eagle was used in Scripture as a symbol and that a study of the bird and its habits and characteristics was of much profit—especially as used by the Holy Spirit to teach valuable lessons to the Lord’s people.

The eagle is considered to be the king of the birds because of its formidable size, its noble appearance, and its unrivaled powers of flight. Characteristically shunning society, the eagle is rarely seen over country where even one or two houses are present. Hence it usually keeps to higher ground and is found in uninhabited areas. A bird of silence, the eagle never advertises its presence or nest (known as an aerie) by calling. The eagle’s solitude is one reason for the paucity of information about this

grand bird and its habits and movements in its own environment or natural habitat. However, bits of information about the eagle have accumulated down through the centuries from various sources and observers in different countries, giving the general public some knowledge of the eagle's outstanding characteristics as recorded in the Bible. The data will enrich our lives if we take time to observe certain unique traits of the bird.

Relatively little can be learned from eagles that are taken into captivity and used for falconry, that is, hunting, and even less is learned from birds that are placed in confinement. How pitiful is the sight of an eagle in captivity; how forlorn is its condition in a cage! The captive eagle perches sadly for hours without blinking or moving a limb. What a contrast to the natural nobility that characterizes this bird when it is in its own environment!

The eagle is often confused with the buzzard and ordinary vultures, but a few peculiar facts help us to identify and to discriminate between the two. For instance, the vulture has V-shaped wings in flight, whereas the eagle flies with stiff, motionless wings that often resemble an airplane. The buzzard hovers and soars over its prospective prey, whereas the eagle rarely hovers. In fact, the eagle rises in the distance, spiraling upward, and then descends in one long, swift glide and pounces

on its prey. Buzzards are often seen in flocks, and they feed on carrion or putrefying flesh. In contrast, the eagle is a lone bird, rarely traveling even with its mate, and prefers to live on freshly slain animals.

This bird of solitude and freedom was chosen by the founding fathers as an emblem of the United States, as a champion of liberty, and it was thus recorded on the country's official seal. There this lover of freedom is shown with arrows grasped in the talons of its left foot and an olive branch in the talons of its right foot, as if to say, "We Americans extend the right hand of fellowship and peace to our fellow nations upon the earth, but we will defend to the death our liberty. Which will you have—peace or war?" In other words, the eagle is a complete, individualistic, and forceful symbol of the spirit of independence.

We will digress for a moment. The Mongol people in the southeastern part of Russia east of the Volga, as well as people in Tibet and in parts of India, have long been known for hunting with eagles. When they find a golden eagle's aerie in the mountains—often at great risk to themselves because of the high rocks—they take the just-feathered young eaglets and begin at once to train them. So greatly is the trained eagle prized by its owner that he will not part with it except for a considerable price. For example, up to the beginning of the Second World War, two

camels or an exceptionally fine horse was usually regarded as a fair price for one trained golden eagle. In Mongolia, the golden eagle is used chiefly for killing the fox, and it is trained not to damage the captured animal because of the value of the pelt. The eagle swoops down on the fleeing animal, grasping with one foot the face and jaws to prevent it from biting and with the other foot the animal's back. Then the great bird brings its two feet close together, thus breaking the animal's spine.

Another interesting fact is that the eagle is noted for longevity. It can live more than a century, although traps, guns, and poison usually claim an eagle before its life span is complete. One bird lived 104 years in confinement in Vienna. An eagle shot in France had a golden band around its neck indicating it had been used for falconry purposes ninety-five years earlier. Another bird, captured not in the feathering state but in the period of its strength, subsequently lived eighty years in confinement.

Under certain conditions, the golden eagle is the fastest bird that flies. In blustery weather, it has no equal, yet on calm days, there are faster fliers. If one is fortunate enough to see an eagle as it leaves the aerie on a quiet day, the impression is of a heavy bird that progresses through the air with slow, almost labored, wing thrust. Actually, even under these conditions, the eagle is moving much faster than its appearance indicates, for it is deceptively fast

in flight. Some have witnessed instances where other birds, known to be swift of wing, were fleeing in panic from an unseen enemy. Then the observers were startled to see an eagle appear on the scene, and with slow and indolent wing movement, the eagle rapidly overtook the other birds in their panicky flight and leisurely seized its prey in its strong talons. Thus a realization of the swiftness of the flight of the eagle dawns upon the inexperienced observer.

The raven and a few other birds are known to be swift and adept in shorter flight and movement. In fact, the raven often annoys the eagle in the air. The eagle's lack of maneuverability under certain circumstances constitutes a relative weakness. However, its swiftness of flight is recognized and used in the Bible, where we read expressions like "as swift as the eagle flieth," "as the eagle that hasteth to the prey," and "as the eagle that hasteth to eat" (Deut. 28:49; Job 9:26; Hab. 1:8). These expressions are used to vividly impress such lessons as the remarkably swift invasions into the Holy Land by some of Israel's enemies, notably King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. And the eagle was the emblem or ensign used by the renowned and feared legions of ancient Rome in the days of their glory and power. As a symbol, the eagle impressed enemies with the swiftness of the destruction of the Roman armies against those who incurred the displeasure of Rome. The eagle was used as a symbol not only to

show rapacity and ferocity of purpose but also to instill fear, as seen in the following texts:

**“For thus saith the LORD; Behold, he shall fly as an eagle, and shall spread his wings over Moab.”  
(Jer. 48:40)**

**“Behold, he shall come up and fly as the eagle, and spread his wings over Bozrah: and at that day shall the heart of the mighty men of Edom be as the heart of a woman in her [birth] pangs.” (Jer. 49:22)**

These two Scriptures are based upon a certain characteristic of the bird; namely, in seizing its prey, the eagle usually flies in the direction of the prey in such a way that it is also flying in the beams of the strong light of the sun, and thereby the approach of the eagle cannot be discerned. When only a few feet from the prey, the eagle suddenly opens its wings, thus creating a shadow over the unsuspecting prey. This sudden, startling appearance and the attendant darkening are designed to momentarily paralyze the prey with fear, much as in the case of the lion, which, with a terrifying roar, first paralyzes and then pounces upon its frightened victim.

**“There be three things which are too wonderful for me: ... The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea.” (Prov. 30:18,19)**

Of the “three things,” we will treat only the first: “the way of an eagle in the air.” When seen high in the heavens, the eagle is a supreme artist in its flight. It is a specialist in soaring and gliding. Much has been written about the eagle’s soaring powers but little about its gliding, yet the gliding is more remarkable because it reveals the bird’s complete mastery over the elements. For example, if a golden eagle decides to travel to a particular place, it does not fly like other birds. The eagle spirals to a height from which one long, continuous glide will take it faster and faster, until the wind literally whistles about its body. The glide may be either with the wind or against the wind, for indeed the eagle progresses almost as easily against the breeze as with it. Utilizing its mastery in gliding, the eagle arrives at a destination after a journey—but a journey in which little or no energy has been expended. One can almost say that distance means nothing to the bird.

No less inspiring than the beauty and the charm of the golden eagle’s glide is its ability to sail in the teeth of a breeze. The wings extend broadly and stiffly, and a few primary feathers are held in an upward curve. Meanwhile, the steering and the stabilizing are done entirely by the tail, which is constantly being moved—now held wide open, now almost closed, now shutting and opening like a lady’s fan.



The eagle is employed in the Bible to personify God's wisdom and His foster care on behalf of His people. Chapters 1 and 10 of the Book of Ezekiel and chapter 4 in the Book of Revelation present a highly figurative and symbolic character portrayal of the glory and likeness of God. One of His four cardinal attributes is shown as the face of an eagle, but why? The reason is the remarkable vision of this bird, as stated in Job 39:29, "Her eyes behold afar off." This text is a basis for saying that the eagle is a symbol of intelligence, wisdom, and omniscience. In everyday parlance, we speak of a person with good vision as having an eagle's eye.

Next comes God's loving care for the nation of Israel. His care is likened to the tender affection but also the firm treatment that is shown by the mother eagle toward her young when she teaches them to fly. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we read:

**"As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings:**

**"So the LORD alone did lead him [Israel]."  
(Deut. 32:11,12)**

The expression "stirreth up her nest" indicates that when the time comes for the young to leave the nest, the mother eagle removes the downy material within the nest, exposing the prickly thorns and the sharp branches that constitute the basic fabric of

the nest. She also, for a season, abstains from feeding her young, deliberately creating conditions of discomfiture that are designed to wean the eaglets from their former environs and to give them a desire to depart on their own. In addition, the mother bird allures the eaglets to imitate her fluttering in flight, demonstrates the rudiments of flight, and, with great currents of air generated by her strong and powerful wings, tends to alarm the insecure eaglets, almost blowing them out of the nest and impressing upon them the need and the urgency of learning to fly. Yet she hovers over her young in loving solicitude so that when the eaglets jump out into the unknown, her wings are in readiness to catch them should they become exhausted. In their weakness and timidity, she takes them upon her outspread wings and carries them to safety. The actions of the mother eagle are a beautiful picture of the fostering care, the discipline, and the training Israel received at the hand of Divine Providence to not be dependent upon others. The lesson for the nation is that their real dependence rests solely upon the Lord their God.

In a similar picture in the Book of Revelation, a woman, representing the true Church, was carried into a wilderness condition on the two wings of an eagle, the Old and New Testaments.

**“And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness,**

**into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent.” (Rev. 12:14)**

The Book of Exodus adds the following thought, showing the process of development by which God draws His people to Himself:

**“Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself.**

**“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine:**

**“And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.”  
(Exod. 19:4-6)**

The eagle has another unusual characteristic. This majestic bird, which dwells in a lofty clime, loving the higher and purer atmosphere, and which is known for its keenness of vision, is constantly hungry. In fact, the eagle’s keenness of vision is directly related to its hunger—it is as though the hunger develops and accentuates the power of vision. As Christians, we should simulate this characteristic. Hunger for the knowledge of God’s Word will increase our keenness of vision, for in proportion to

our *degree* of hunger, we will make every effort to find the truth, to know the truth, to love the truth, and to serve the truth to the best of our ability. In the Gospels, Jesus said, “For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together” (Matt. 24:28). In other words, God’s people are likened to eagles that are attracted by a carcass but not a putrefying carcass. Job 39:30 states, “Her young ones also suck up blood: and where the slain are, there is she.” The point is that the eagles gather primarily to a *freshly slain* carcass. Thus the Lord’s people are attracted to a message that has as its central or rallying theme the dead humanity of Christ. This attraction is particularly true in our day, for it is now possible to understand why it was necessary for Jesus to die for every man. Those who have the desire and hunger can readily comprehend the philosophy and understanding of this mystery.

Indeed the Christian can profit by considering this characteristic of the eagle—its desire for freshly slain flesh—and those who want to know the truth must seek for it as for hidden treasure. Such treasure is not found on the surface of the ground. No, to find hidden treasure requires effort, energy, patience, and time. “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matt. 7:7). Prayer is also essential, whereby Christians look to the Lord for help and leadership in understanding His Word. The following quotation

from the Book of Proverbs beautifully expresses the heart attitude of those who seek a meaningful, in-depth understanding of Scripture.

**“My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee;**

**“So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding;**

**“Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding;**

**“If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for *hid treasures*;**

**“Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.**

**“For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.**

**“He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly.**

**“He keepeth the paths of judgment, and preserveth the way of his saints.**

**“Then shalt thou understand righteousness, and judgment, and equity; yea, every good path.”**

**(Prov. 2:1-9)**

Frank Shallieu