

Ezekiel 34:11-16

“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.”

Prayer

It has been said by smarter and wiser people than me that one can't really preach God's word to God's people until God's word has preached to you. It also has been said, we don't really study God's word; it studies us. Such is the case with this section of the book of Ezekiel. Several years ago, while reading through the Bible I was struck by the profound imagery Ezekiel uses to describe God's relationship to his people. The imagery of the shepherd. But there's more to it than that. In a book that has some very obscure symbolism and some very hard declarations to God's people in exile, here is a word of comfort and hope to us all.

As I have considered this passage over the past few weeks, it has been both a challenge and a comfort to me. It is easy to feel the weight and even the rebuke in the first several verses. It is also wonderful to know that God cares for his people, even when human leaders fail. And what a reassurance to hear there is a peace available to each of us because Jesus is our one and only good shepherd.

Before we walk through Ezekiel 34, I think it would be helpful to have a little context for the book itself. In the flow of Israel's history from Adam up to Jesus, Ezekiel is closer to the end of that timeline. The journey starts with Genesis and all the events that lead the people into Egypt. It moves to Moses and everything God did to bring them out. Next is Joshua and the Judges which lead to David and the kingdom. After the kingdom divides into Israel and Judah, the northern kingdom is never really faithful to God, eventually being swallowed up by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah had moments of revival and faithfulness

intermixed with seasons of apostasy and rebellion. In general though, Judah followed Israel on its downward path. As Judah became worse and worse Jeremiah, as the final prophet to the intact nation, had a clear message: judgement was at hand. Repent before God brings the Babylonians as his agents. But neither the people nor the king nor the spiritual leaders repented, so judgement came.

At this point there were a few different invasions and resulting deportations of people from Jerusalem and Judea to Babylon. In one of these deportations, Ezekiel was taken up and shipped off. So, as he speaks, he is trying to both explain why God is allowing such things to happen (justice) but also the reality that even though weeping may last for the night, joy comes in the morning (mercy). Now, add to the mix the sad truth that while Ezekiel and others are in exile, the people back home still did not repent. Thus, the judgement continued and even chapter 33 of Ezekiel recounts their receiving of the news that Jerusalem was destroyed. On top of all of this, there seems to be a sort of spiritual malaise, an apathy that has blinded the people and the leaders into thinking they are super spiritual and following God when they really were not. Just read through Ezekiel 8-10 to see this sad reality: God's presence left the temple and the nation and the people but only Ezekiel saw it.

This is the setting for Ezekiel's prophecies: Living in a culture that is indifferent and even opposed to their faith. Seeing a growing arrogance among the people that their sins were respectable, maybe even justified. And a lost passion for God and following his commands while at the same time promoting their own hyper spirituality. Sound familiar?

Into this context Ezekiel is given a prophecy. He is called to prophecy to the shepherds of Israel. (Ezk 34:1) One could rightly ask so what? What does that have to do with me? A fair question, to be sure. My answer is this: shepherding is not just an Old Testament concept. Jesus told his disciples to feed his sheep (Jn 21:17) and Peter calls the leaders of churches to whom he was writing to shepherd the flock of God (1 Pt 5:2). I would add to that we each have a shepherding responsibility. To be sure we, as elders, need to shepherd you, God's people. Husbands and fathers, we are to shepherd our wives and our families. Mothers likewise have a huge shepherding role in the lives of your children and speaking winsomely into your husband's life. Small groups, we are to shepherd our brothers and sisters. Singles, teens, senior saints, we are to shepherd the friends God has placed into our lives. Dare I say, none of us are exempt.

As we consider this prophecy, I think it will be helpful to break it down into 4 sections:

- 1) The challenge to human shepherds
- 2) The comfort that God himself is our true shepherd

- 3) The reality that Christ is the Good Shepherd
- 4) The covenant of peace God provides as our shepherd

Ezekiel starts out his prophecy with a challenge to human shepherds. Take a look at verses 1-6:

The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

A scathing rebuke, to be sure. But as I mentioned a moment ago, this is not just for “those guys back then”. It extends to us today. To me and Dan and Ryan and Steve as your elders who are responsible for your spiritual care. For you men as husbands and fathers and brothers. For ladies as wives and mothers and sisters. Singles and youths in your friend groups and family relationships. We are all shepherding (or should be shepherding) someone.

That said, in the original context Ezekiel is coming down hard on the spiritual leaders of the people. Notice: this is not simply an apathy or an incompetence, which would be bad enough. No, they were serving themselves rather than the people. They were feeding themselves and neglecting the people. In essence they were hoarding God’s blessings to the detriment of God’s people.

And just so we know this wasn’t simply an innocent oversight, Ezekiel emphasizes the impact: the weak are left in their weakness, the injured are ignored, the sick are not treated, the wanderer is given no guidance, and those who are lost are left alone. To sum it up, this is total abandonment. In fact, that is what Ezekiel states: God’s people were scattered with no one to help them. To mix the metaphor, they were adrift at sea in a ship without a sail or a rudder. They were in the Grand Canyon at night without water or a backpack or flashlight.

How does this apply to us? What can we gain from this warning? I will repeat what I have said before, we need to let the Spirit press on us. Right now. In this moment. What is God saying to you? We need to feel the weight of this passage. Here is my prayer: “Father, how

am I like these shepherds? When have I eaten your food and not fed those around me? When have I ignored or neglected the weak or the sick or the injured or the wandering or the lost? Forgive me and redirect me. Away from myself and back to you and your people.”

I would plead each of you: consider Ezekiel’s challenge. The press of the Holy Spirit is a good thing. We should all be striving to move forward in our walk with Christ. Consider Paul’s words in **Philippians 3:12: Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**

As dramatic as God’s challenge is to us, whatever our shepherding role might be, he offers comfort to his people. **Ezekiel 34:14-16: I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.**

Notice here the comfort is two-fold. First, God provides for his people. He cares for us. He draws us back. He seeks us out. Everything neglected by the shepherds God provides. This should reassure us. Even if no one else cares for us, God cares. Throughout his word, God continually says “I will never leave you. I will never forsake you.” And it should reassure us that we cannot mess up God’s plan. Can we make mistakes? No doubt. Are there consequences to those mistakes? Absolutely. But can we fail so miserably that God cannot recover? The answer my friends is no.

I feel compelled to pause here for a personal story. Twenty plus years ago I was an elder at a different church and we had a Senior Pastor who was struggling. But we as his fellow elders did not shepherd him well. We embodied verse 4. In the end I had to sit in his office and ask him to resign. I hurt him. I hurt the church. The months of long and frequent meetings hurt my family. In a word, I messed up. But I’m here to declare that what I know was a mess up God used for his glory. That church would not have its strong and vibrant ministry without that event. LEFC would not be a band of brothers without that event. Many who were caught up in the cult of personality would not have been freed without that event. Where I failed, God succeeded. Can we fail so miserably that God cannot recover? The answer my friends is no.

But there is another aspect of comfort here that we dare not miss. God is personally active in his care for his people. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I can think of God as an air traffic controller. He is in control of everything, and he is making sure everything comes

out good and right and just in the end. But he is distant, and far off. Sure, he's reachable by prayer but he's still up in the tower, tracking the billions of lives both now and into the future.

This passage blows that idea out of the water. God is not an air traffic controller. He is our shepherd. And here's the thing about shepherds, especially in Ezekiel's day, they lived with their sheep. That is what God is committing to for his people. To personally care for us. Look at verses 11-12: **“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.”**

What should we make of this? Certainly, that God cares. Certainly, that he will never leave us nor forsake us nor leave us to our own devices. But along with all of that, he is personally with us. In the waiting room. In the court room. In the unemployment office. In the lawyer's office. At the bedside. At the graveside. Hear him clearly: **I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.**

Brothers and sisters, see God's personal concern for you. See the length and the depth and the height and the breadth of God's personal love for you. If you are adrift at sea, God is your rudder and sail and the wind to bring you home. If you are in the Grand Canyon at night, God is your pack and your water and your path and the light to lead you out.

This leads us directly to the third awesome truth from this passage: Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd. Look at **Ezekiel 34:22-24: I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.**

What is Ezekiel talking about here? How can David be God's "one shepherd?" David's been dead for over 400 years when this was written. But remember God's promise to David in **1 Chronicles 17:11-14: “When your days are fulfilled to walk with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took**

it from him who was before you, but I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever.”

Jesus, of course, is from the lineage of David as Matthew lays out at the very beginning of his gospel. And throughout his life, Jesus fulfilled various prophecies to establish his connection to the Davidic throne. But it is John 10 that establishes Ezekiel 34 as a direct connection with Jesus.

John 10:8: All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.

John 10:2-4: But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

John 10:10-11: The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

See how Jesus bridges the gap between Ezekiel 34 and himself? Our first section is really about the thieves and the robbers. Think about it? Those spiritual leaders were not interested in God’s people. They were only interested in themselves. Any of us who live in that mindset are really robbing God and his people.

But Jesus makes it clear: he is the the Good Shepherd. His sheep hear his voice, and they follow him. More than that, he lays down his life for them. And this is really the crux of the matter. Metaphors aside, Jesus died so we can live. Do you believe this? When you hear Jesus’ voice, do you follow him?

I need to linger here for a moment because I remember a day when I would have agreed with all the information in this sermon, but its truth hadn’t made into my heart. It is often said that knowing about Jesus is not the same as knowing Jesus. My ache this morning is that there are some in this room who are in this very state. Your heads are full, but your hearts are empty.

And here’s the greatest news there ever was and will ever be. Jesus is calling you today to follow him. Today is the day, your day, to respond to him, to surrender, to trust. Hear the voice of the one who loves you: **John 10:27-30: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater**

than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.”

For those of us who are walking with Christ whether it's been a week or a year or several decades, this is a promise is for us as well. We are as secure today as we have ever been. And Jesus' voice? He is still calling us. Follow me. Trust me. Listen to me. Today. Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden. I will give you rest.

Father, help us. Whether we are truly hearing Jesus' voice for the first time or for the 1,000th time, we need you to open our ears and make our hearts receptive to his call. You are faithful. You will surely do it. Amen.

This leads us nicely to the final point: God has crafted for us a covenant of peace.

Ezekiel 34:25a: “I will make with them a covenant of peace.”

Ezekiel 34:30-31: And they shall know that I am the LORD their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord GOD. And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord GOD.”

Brothers and sisters, please don't miss this point. It is true. People are lousy shepherds. Dan, Ryan, Steve and I do our best by the grace of God. But we mess up, both individually and collectively. None of you are perfect shepherds to your spouses or your families or your friends. But hear this: God knows that. And he cares. By the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, he has secured for us a peace that will endure forever.

It is helpful to remember that this peace is expressed by the Hebrew word shalom. Shalom encompasses all our normal meanings of peace (lack of conflict, harmony between people, calmness, serenity, etc) But it extends beyond that. It is meant to convey a heart attitude, a way of looking at life. Not an apathetic “whatever will be, will be” philosophy, but rather the active confidence that God is leading and guiding and protecting us and nothing can separate us from his love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And this peace is not simply an Amazon package God drops on our door one day. It is a covenant, a promise, a commitment he his making with us. Here is something I often lose sight of. I forget how invested God is in my life and the life of each one of us who call Jesus their Lord and in the life of this church. Brothers and sisters hear this: This is not a contract he signed and is therefore obligated to fulfill. No, God is here, by his Spirit. He is with us because he wants to be here. Here, in this room. Here, in our hearts. Leading. Guiding. Protecting. Convicting. Strengthening. Encouraging.

This is the bottom line, at least for me. Faith, religion, even Christianity. It can easily become about words and ideas. We can easily feel lost, even in the church. We can easily

feel neglected even as a follower of Christ. The world. The flesh. The devil. They are each real foes and they are poking at us and pulling on us, even at this present moment.

But hear again the promise of God. **Ezekiel 34:15-16. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.**

You are not alone. You are not abandoned. You are not your worst sin. Brothers, sisters you are deeply loved by God and securely kept by Christ and if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.

Prayer