

The Shepherd

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[0 : 0 0] As we turn to God's word, let's pray for a moment. Father, we pray that our hearts and our minds would be open before you as your word is now open before us.

Please teach us and please write your word in our hearts. And please make us into the people you want us to be. Amen. Please turn back for a few moments to the chapter we read in Ezekiel chapter 34.

We're going to think, I suppose, about the whole chapter and focus on the remarkable imagery that we have in this chapter concerning the shepherd.

We can read again, though, at verse 10. Thus says the Lord God, behold, I am against the shepherds. And I'll require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep.

No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them. For thus says the Lord God, behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.

[1 : 2 3] Ezekiel is probably not one of the most commonly read books of the Bible. It's interesting because it's actually one of the biggest. I think it's the third biggest book of the Bible.

But it's one that we don't tend to read very often. And I suppose part of that is that it's maybe not necessarily the easiest book in the Bible to understand.

When you come to read through Ezekiel, there's lots of very vivid imagery. These kind of dramatic descriptions that God gave Ezekiel as he presented him with visions.

And you can read them and think, well, it's a wee bit hard to understand. It can feel a wee bit inaccessible. But with a bit of help, we can open up this book and discover that it contains some absolutely stunning teaching.

Ezekiel is just an amazing book. One of the most important ways to open up a book like Ezekiel, or really any other Old Testament prophecy, is to remember two key words.

[2 : 3 1] And the two key words are judgment and salvation. So whenever you read a prophecy in the Old Testament, always have these two words in your mind.

Judgment and salvation. Or if you want, you could say warning and hope. All the prophecies in the Old Testament have this in common. These prophets came to warn the people because they were turning away from God.

And so they came with a message of judgment because the people were in a perilous condition. But alongside that warning message of judgment, the prophets always gave a message of hope.

No matter how bad things were, God was always calling his people back. He was always giving them a message of hope. So whenever you're reading the Old Testament prophets, always remember judgment and salvation.

Sometimes there's a lot of judgment. But the salvation is always there as well. One of the clearest examples of this judgment salvation message is the chapter that we read in Ezekiel 34.

[3 : 46] This passage is based on the image of a shepherd. And I think it's a fascinating image for us to consider. When we tend to think of shepherds today, we tend to kind of think of a kind of tranquil, peaceful image.

So if you took your phone out or if you go home to your computer and Google shepherd and then select images, you get all sorts of idyllic pictures of kind of lambs skipping over grass and daisies and blue skies.

And everything looks so idyllic. But of course, that's probably not really very true. And any crofter in here will tell you that there's not many days of idyllic sunshine in terms of looking after a sheep around all through the year in Scotland.

Often conditions are very harsh. And that's definitely true for us in Lewis and for the highlands and islands of Scotland. But it's also absolutely true for the shepherds who worked in the ancient Near East in the days of the Old Testament.

You can see the kind of hints towards us in the chapter that we read. Verse 5 talks about wild beasts. Verse 13 talks about rugged landscape. There's clouds and thick darkness mentioned in verse 21, the idea of quite bad, hostile weather.

[5 : 13] A shepherd in the Old Testament most definitely did not just lie in the sunshine while his sheep just skipped by. To be a shepherd in the days of the Old Testament was a brutal job.

The shepherd had to lead his flock through harsh terrain. He had to find food. He had to defend the sheep from predators. He had to strengthen the weak. He had to carry the injured. He had to rescue the lost.

A shepherd had to be brave, strong, determined, wise. And he needed a huge amount of stamina. You ask yourself the question, would you fight a lion? Would you sleep in a ravine?

Would you take a massive flock of sheep and lead them over a mountain pass? I don't think any of us would do that. And so when we have this image of a shepherd, it's not a tranquil image.

It's a powerful, epic image. But of course, it's very important to remember that Ezekiel chapter 34 is not actually talking about shepherds.

[6 : 18] It's using the imagery of shepherding to talk about something else. What's Ezekiel 34 talking about? It's talking about leadership. The shepherd image is a metaphor for the leaders of Israel.

The chapter begins, The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel and say to them, Even to the shepherds, thus says the Lord God, As shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, Should not shepherds feed the sheep?

And then at the very end, we read, You shall know that I am the Lord their God with them, And that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord. You are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, And I am your God, declares the Lord God.

So when Ezekiel 34 talks about sheep, It's talking about God's people. When it talks about shepherds, It's talking about Israel's leaders. And of course, the ultimate example of the leader shepherd was the king.

David was the prime model of this. He was a shepherd and he became king. And when he did become king, It was said to him, You shall be shepherd of my people Israel.

[7 : 34] So from David onwards, The rulers of Israel were always to be shepherds Who led their people, Who protected their people, Who defended them, Who provided for them, And who always, always looked out for them.

And I just want to pause for a wee moment here To note that this really is the biblical definition of good leadership. In the Bible, The authority and power of leadership Always comes with a major duty of care Towards those who've been placed under you.

And I think that's something that's incredibly important for us to remember, Especially for any of you here who are in a position of leadership. If you're a boss or a supervisor, Or if you have people under you in your workplace, Or if you're involved in a committee or some kind of volunteering, Where you have people under you, If you're a leader, If you're in charge of something, If you're a boss, You must always, We must always remember This biblical model of leadership.

Often when we face, When we go to work, We can face targets. And often the higher up you go, The more targets you face. There's got to be the right level of performance, Efficiency, Cost cutting, Achieving all sorts of objectives.

There's all of these things that we need to do. You're bombarded with targets When you're in a position of leadership. But what's God's number one target For you as a leader?

[9 : 02] His number one target is To make sure the people underneath you Are okay. That's the role of a leader.

To care for his sheep. And I think that's One of the many times When we see that the Bible's emphasis Is the opposite Of what we see in the world around us. Because you go to the workplace just now, Most of the time, People's worry is that They think, Is the person above me happy?

So you're worried about What your boss is going to say. Worried about what your supervisor says. Worried about what that appraisal meeting Is going to involve. You think, Is the person above me happy? The Bible says, That's not your primary concern.

Your primary concern is, Are the people underneath me happy? Are they okay? Am I leading them well? Ezekiel 34 is Giving us a really good reminder Of what God-honoring leadership looks like.

But at the same time, It's using this image To give a warning message To Israel's leadership. And this comes at a particularly important time Because Ezekiel is really Prophesying at a moment When the nation has fallen apart.

[10 : 24] The history of the Old Testament Is kind of a general downward story Where things tend to get worse And worse and worse over time. There's a few kind of encouragements Along the way, But on the whole, The general direction is downward Where the high point of the nation Being established, The kingdom being established under David And the temple being built under Solomon From there on, It's just downhill all the way.

And the lowest point Is at Ezekiel. When the kingdom has been destroyed, The temple is in ruins And most of the people Have been taken in captivity To exile in Babylon.

And so for that reason, The message of this chapter Is a stark message of judgment. You see that in verse 10, God says, Behold, I am against the shepherds.

But alongside this message of judgment, There is a remarkable message Of salvation and hope. And I want us to look at that together And there's a huge amount in this chapter We'll only barely scratch the surface.

I just want us to look at three simple things. And all of these things Are based around the question, What is this chapter teaching us about God? And that's a good question to always ask Whenever you read part of the Bible To ask yourself the question, What is this teaching me about God?

[11 : 42] And I want us to just highlight three things And they are, The frustration of God, The compassion of God, And the determination of God.

So, first of all, The frustration of God. When we think of God's attributes, We tend to think of things like The holiness of God, The power of God, The wisdom of God, The love of God. We don't often think about The frustration of God.

I don't think I've ever seen a chapter In a book on the frustration of God. And you almost think, Is that even a really appropriate thing For us to say. But if you look at this chapter, I think one thing that is absolutely clear Is that God is deeply frustrated With Israel's leadership.

He's absolutely appalled At the way they've behaved. And the reason he is so frustrated Is because Israel's leaders Have utterly abused their position. And they have horribly exploited The people who are under their care.

The opening words of the chapter Make it very clear. They're saying, Shepherds, You've been feeding yourselves. You're supposed to feed the sheep. You eat the fat. You clothe yourselves with the wool. You slaughter the fat ones, But you don't feed the sheep.

[12 : 54] And verse 4 is very explicit. The weak you've not strengthened. The sick you've not healed. The injured you've not bound up. The strayed you've not brought back. The lost you have not sought.

And with force and harshness You have ruled them. And so these shepherds, Instead of caring for their flock, Were exploiting them. We could even say They were fleecing their own flock And just trying to get everything they could For their own benefit At the expense of the people around them, Particularly the vulnerable.

And God's response to that Is one of deep and profound frustration. Now it's very easy to think That the frustration of God Would be a negative thing.

We probably don't like the idea Of a God who is frustrated. But I hope that this chapter will show us That the frustration of God Is a beautiful and wonderful thing.

If you ask yourself the question What frustrates you? What would you say? Or if you ask What frustrates the world around me?

[14 : 05] What would you say? I've been on a kind of Really dramatic learning experience In the past 18 months Since I moved to Edinburgh Because in Lewis When you hear a car horn tooting It means hello.

And you hear the horn toot And you look around Expecting to see a familiar face. A car horn tooting Doesn't mean hello in Edinburgh. It means Usually means you're an idiot.

And it's been quite surprising I mean I probably sound like Such a naive Lyozok But it's really been quite surprising Just how incredibly aggressive People are on the road.

So you can see people get so frustrated. Someone's in the wrong lane They blast the horn. Somebody parks in the wrong place. People get enraged. I even know somebody Who had a note put through their Left on their doorstep Saying that your parking is Well I'm not going to say the word But it wasn't complimentary Because the car in front of their house Was parked half on the curb.

It wasn't even their car. But somebody had felt the need To leave this note. People get incredibly frustrated. I got a row the other day From a cyclist actually Because I hadn't indicated properly I was on my bike as well.

[15 : 25] People get incredibly frustrated On the roads. So I think it's They should come to Lewis For a bit of civilised behaviour On the roads I think.

I'm sure you can think of Other examples yourselves. People get frustrated At the slightest thing. A referee's decision In a football match.

Where someone puts their car Or what's happening With someone's sheep Or whatever it may be. People can get incredibly frustrated. Facebook's another Very fertile field For frustration to go.

And we can often Get frustrated ourselves. And that's probably A good question to ask. What frustrated you? What frustrated me? In the past week? Now ask the question What frustrates God?

And the answer That Ezekiel 34 gives us Is that God is frustrated When powerful people Rip off the vulnerable people Around them And treat them with harshness And make themselves richer And more comfortable At their expense.

[16 : 36] Because that's exactly What Ezekiel 34 is describing. Rulers who just Protected themselves Fed themselves Made sure that they were okay And watched While the people They were supposed to care for Were struggling And were being exploited.

That is what frustrates God. And that frustration Tells us that God Cares deeply About people. His frustration Is not a character flaw.

It's actually a sign Of his integrity. It demonstrates His justice And his mercy. So I've seen people Raging Because a car In front of them Is in the wrong lane.

I've seen people Furious Because someone Is struggling to park. I've seen people Going mental Because a plane Is delayed Or because the ferry Has been cancelled. We see people Raging About climate change.

I've never seen Anybody raging Because they've seen A child wear The same clothes To school Every day. I've never seen Anybody raging Because a family Has to go to a food bank.

[17 : 49] Now I'm not saying That people don't care About these things. I know that many do And that's a brilliant thing. But what I'm talking about Is that instinctive reaction Of deep frustration When the vulnerable Are exploited.

We don't tend to see it. Instead we're numbed by it. We're numbed to it. And sometimes people Are even entertained by it. And I can only think Of one exception.

I can think of one person Who saw the poor Being exploited. He saw wealthy people Sucking every penny They could From these needy people In order to get richer.

He saw these people Exploiting The religious commitment Of these poor people In order to make themselves More well off. And when this person Saw that kind of activity Taking place He literally Went in among them And threw their tables over Poured their money Out on the ground And told them to get out.

Do you know that person's name? Jesus Christ. That's exactly what he was doing When he cleansed the temple And that was why he did it.

[19 : 05] God is deeply frustrated In this chapter Because the powerful Are fleecing the vulnerable. And that's why God's frustration Is a beautiful thing.

And I look at myself And I need to pray Lord please make my frustrations The same as your frustrations. The second thing this chapter shows us Is the compassion of God.

So yes it reveals God's frustration. That frustration is directed Towards the leaders Who failed in their responsibilities. But if God is frustrated With the leaders What does he think of the sheep?

Well here's where we see A really important point That is maybe easy to misunderstand. If we think about shepherds and sheep Our minds can easily think You know That the shepherd and the sheep It's a very kind of tranquil Peaceful Stress free Environment To be in.

I don't think that's accurate at all Because the truth is Sheep are incredibly annoying. And I'm sure anybody here Who's involved with them Will tell you that.

[20 : 20] You can be driving along the road And you see a sheep Just having a convenient snooze In the middle of the road And you have to Get out of her way Rather than her Getting out of your way. You can go and gather sheep You go up a hill You bring them all down And you're just down at the bottom And they decide to run back up again.

Sheep can be Very frustrating animals. And the truth is People can be very frustrating as well. But the remarkable thing About the imagery in Ezekiel 34 Is that not one ounce Of God's frustration Is directed towards The struggling sheep.

Instead He shows them The most amazing compassion. Look again at verse 4 And you'll see some key words Being used to describe the flock. Verse 4 says The weak You've not strengthened The sick You've not healed The injured You've not bound up The strayed You've not brought back The lost You've not sought I think it's a remarkable verse Because God's frustration With the well fed shepherds Arises from his deep compassion Towards the vulnerable In the flock.

Imagine being the shepherd In this verse That's being described. You've got this flock And you're trying to move forward As much as you can But the weak Are holding you up And they're slow. Others are showing Signs of sickness And that's holding you up as well.

You try to carry on Then some of them stumble And they get injured So you need to go And try and help them And bind up their wounds You carry on Half a dozen of them Wander off You need to go and get them You find that two or three Are just completely lost So you need to stop All the other sheep So you can go And take the opportunity To go and bring back These ones That have disappeared And you think of that shepherd And you'll be thinking These sick Weak Injured Straying sheep Are such a pain But God says They are not a pain They are the priority And that's why this chapter Is one of the many chapters In the Old Testament That reveals The extraordinary compassion Of God In many ways As we said The story of the Old Testament Is a story of failure The kings failed The nation failed The people failed And Ezekiel is a prophet At the lowest point of all Jerusalem has fallen

[22 : 41] They are in exile In Babylon Ezekiel is prophesying To a completely broken Failed nation But at the very same time The Old Testament story Is a story of never failure Because in it all No matter how weak Or sick Or injured Or lost The people were God's compassion His mercy And his love Never Ever Fails And that compassion Shown by God Towards his people In this chapter Is an extraordinary comfort To us Because it's so easy To think That our weaknesses And our failings Must be so frustrating And annoying To God It's so easy To look at other people Who seem like Strong Christians And to think God must be so much more Happy with them I am just a big disappointment And so often I find I've looked At my own life And I'm sure As a Christian You're the same

You look at the mistakes You make The silly things That you keep on doing And you think God must be so fed up of me You think I'm so weak in my faith I'm sick in my mind And my body I'm injured I'm bruised in my life I've strayed so often And sometimes I just feel so lost And everything seems To be broken And in all of that mess What does God think of you?

He says You are my sheep And I love you so much And that compassion Is proved By the third thing That we see in this chapter We see the frustration of God The compassion of God And the determination Of God Ezekiel 34 Delivers a firm message Of judgment Against the leadership Of Israel God is not happy With how they have been Treating the people And the situation Described in this chapter Is a mess The strong are just Getting stronger The weak are getting weaker The people are being exploited And as a result Everyone's just broken And scattered The shepherds Have failed miserably The flock is disintegrating The people are broken And that imagery Is exactly the reality Of the people of Israel Their nation has collapsed The ten tribes In the north Have been obliterated 200 years earlier What was left in the south Has now been

Almost all taken to Babylon Some of the other ones Fled to Egypt And all that's left In Jerusalem Are just the weakest And poorest The shepherding Of this nation The protection The guiding The providing The security That a shepherd Was supposed to provide Has been a complete And total failure In other words The shepherds Have been a complete disaster But God's response Is absolutely amazing All of Israel's Shepherds have failed So what does God say?

God says I'll do it And that's where we see The astounding promise Of salvation Coming out of this Message of judgment Look from verse 11 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's among his sheep That have been scattered So will I seek out my sheep And I will rescue them From all places Where they've 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 And on rich pasture They shall feed On the mountains of Israel I myself I myself I will be the shepherd I will be the shepherd Of my sheep And I myself Will make them lie down Declares the Lord I will seek the lost I will bring back the strayed I will bind up the injured I will strengthen the weak

[26 : 49] God's response Is not to moan about the shepherds Or to lament their failings Or to give up on the sheep He looks at the weak Sick Injured Strayed Lost people In this world And he says I will be their shepherd I'll lead them I'll provide them I'll defend them I'll find them I'll rescue them And there's a sense In which the whole Of reformed Christian theology The whole of Calvinism The whole of the doctrines That we believe As a church Can be summed up In three words from God I'll do it And the failure Of the Old Testament leaders And the Old Testament people Shows us That we on our own We can't do it We can't save ourselves We can't be our own shepherds We can't fix our own problems What we desperately need Is for God To do it for us You think of the The spiritual plight Of humanity All the brokenness

That we see in the world Around us The fact that We're alienated from each other And we're alienated from God And we think Somehow this needs to be Fixed But we can't do it And we desperately need to Need God To do it for us And that's exactly What God Is determined To do And all of it Sums up In what the chapter promises In verse 23 Where he says I will set over them One shepherd My servant David He shall feed them He shall feed them And be their shepherd And I the Lord Will be their God My servant David Shall be prince among them I am the Lord I have spoken And this of course Isn't looking back to David It's looking forward To the true son of David To Jesus Christ He is the good shepherd He is the true king He is the descendant of David He is the one Through whom God's salvation Is going to come Everything that we are highlighting here Is pointing us Towards Jesus As we said He's the one

Who was Deeply frustrated When the vulnerable Were exploited He was incredibly compassionate Towards people Who were broken And in desperate need But most of all Jesus Is utterly Determined To rescue His flock And that determination Took Jesus All the way To the cross And there The shepherd Laid down His life For the sheep And never forget That God knew that When God says In Ezekiel 34 I'll do it I'll be the shepherd Of my sheep He knew That that did not mean Going out into the hills And finding people He knew it didn't mean Fighting wild animals He knew it wouldn't mean Being exposed to bad weather He knew it meant Far, far more than that It meant Humbling himself To the point of death Even death on the cross With all the horror And pain And agony That that would involve

And still God the son Says I'll do it And he did it Because that is How determined he is To save you And so that frustration That we see in this chapter Is a frustration At all the brokenness That you experience in life That compassion That we see In this chapter Is compassion Directed towards you And the determination That we see here Is a determination To save you Because God looks at you And he says This person desperately Needs to be saved And do you know what Whatever it takes Whatever the cost

Whatever the pain I'll do it That is how precious You are to God And if you're maybe Not yet a Christian And wondering What God thinks of you I hope you can see That God will stop At nothing To rescue you And the only Stumbling block Is if you say To the good shepherd No thanks Please don't ever say that Let's pray No thanks Thank you At nothing Thank you