

When Shepherds Lose the Word, the Sheep Lose Their Way

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Preacher: Pastor Andrew

[0:00] Amen. Open your Bibles, if you would please, to Judges chapter 17. Judges chapter 17.

If you're using the Pew Bible, it's on page 216. Judges chapter 17. We're kind of in the final movement, as it were, the final message of our series, working through the book of Judges. And as we have made our way through, we see that the times are getting darker and darker and darker as we go from start to finish. Now, on one hand, that becomes a measure of maybe you're being disturbed or frustrated or discouraged at what's taking place.

On the other hand, I trust that as we see that God's faithfulness is carrying His people in spite of their rebellion against Him, is a reminder and maybe even an encouragement to us that regardless of how bad things are, God remains true to His Word.

That the bottom, essentially, can drop out of a nation. A moral collapse can happen in almost totality. And yet, God will remain faithful to His people.

[1:22] He remains faithful to them because He remains faithful to His Word, His promise. So, even as we begin our time together and we evaluate our life, regardless of where you are on the continuum of faith or regardless of where you are in relationship to your posture towards God, if you consider yourself one who is seeking to be loyal and consistent and faithful in your walk with Him, then you can enjoy the benefits of that fellowship with God.

But for some of us, perhaps, that there have been consistent times of wandering away. And I think of the psalmist, or excuse me, the hymnist who writes, prone to wander, Lord, I feel it.

Prone to leave the God I love. Take my heart, take and seal it. Seal it for thy courts above. The book of Judges is a testimony that even when God's people wander from God, even when God's people abandon God, God will not abandon His people.

And so we come to this final message. And on your outlines, you see kind of this title, this phrase that kind of has become for us kind of this summary phrase for the book.

And it's this. When the shepherds lose the word, the people lose their way. When the shepherds lose the word, the people lose their way.

[2:59] The word of God, from start to finish, is the word that is meant to usher us into relationship with God. God was creating for Himself a covenant people.

A people of promise. A people to Himself. And that people would be bound to Him and committed to Him and enjoy the benefits of fellowship with Him as they coupled their hearts to obedience to the Word.

In knowing the Word. In following the Word. In teaching the Word. In the book of Judges, it is a book of shepherding care. It's a book of family heads, fathers and mothers, leading their homes to love God through His Word.

The instructions that we receive in the book of Deuteronomy are united in that frame. They want to help us recognize the seriousness and significance of knowing the Word, instructing our children and their children being instructed as well.

And the result of that is a people who follow after God. We come to Judges chapter 17. And again, it's on page 216.

[4:13] And we see that this whole section of Scripture is kind of bound together front and back by this phrase. It says in Judges chapter 17 verse 6, it says, In those days there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And at the very end of the book, Judges chapter 21 verse 25, this repeated phrase, In those days there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Then a reminder as we make our way through these final sections. Chapter 18 verse 1 says, In those days there was no king in Israel.

And then in chapter 19 verse 1, In those days when there was no king in Israel. Now in fact, there was a king in Israel. In fact, there was a sovereign God who was over his people.

In fact, there was a God over the universe who carried ultimate authority and carried this ultimate sovereignty over the universe.

[5:22] He was in fact in place and over his people. So, the fact that the people did not acknowledge that God was king over Israel did not mean that there was no king in Israel.

And this comes to a head for us when we turn the page to 1 Samuel, which is the next series, not our sermon series, but the next series in the history of the people.

In 1 Samuel chapter 8 verse 5, the people want Samuel to appoint for them a king. They say, Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations. So Samuel, in disgust, turns to the Lord.

In 1 Samuel 8 verse 7, he prays the Lord and the Lord says, Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.

You see, God had been king over Israel. God was, in fact, their sovereign God, their sovereign Lord. And in Psalm 93, he makes that abundantly clear.

[6:31] And throughout the Psalms, we find this resounding theme of the sovereignty, the lordship of God. He says, The Lord reigns. He is robed in majesty.

The Lord is robed. He has put on strength as his belt. Yet the world is established. Yes, it is, it shall never be moved. Your throne is established from of old.

You are from everlasting. The Lord reigns. This line repeated throughout this section has become this summary statement of a nation who has rejected God.

That is the underlying problem. Not that there wasn't a king who was over them, God himself, but that the people themselves rejected the sovereignty and the authority of God.

Judges chapter 17 to 21 provide this glaring example of a nation and their wholesale rejection of the Lord.

[7:34] The nation was called to distinctiveness. We see that in Exodus chapter 19 where God is making a people for himself. You will be my treasured possession, God says. You will be a kingdom of priests, God says, and a holy nation.

That was his heart for his people to make them distinct, to call them out, to draw them to himself, to lift them up as a treasured possession in the world that people, when they see the nation of Israel, that they would see God.

And we have seen this graphic as we have been working our way through this series. And a nation that was meant to be devoted to God little by little, this gradual decline, this moral collapse.

And generation after generation of people who continued to distance themselves from God. So by the time we get to chapter 17, we find that Israel is worshiping like Canaan.

We get to chapter 19, not only are they worshiping like Canaan, but the people are acting like Canaan. A nation that was meant to drive the Canaanites out has actually been so inundated and so polluted by Canaanite thinking and theology and activity, it's as if Canaan has actually come in, has infiltrated the ranks.

[9:02] A moral decline that has characterized this people so that by the time you get to the end of the book, you see that there is no longer an oppressor, there is no longer a deliverer, there is no longer a nation who is confessing sin or repenting from it.

This is a nation whose activity has turned totally towards itself. It's completely turned inward. Now opposition is happening within the ranks.

But then, as you read through chapter 17 to 21, you find this shocking revelation. Judges chapter 18 verse 30 says, And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves and the son, Jonathan, the son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land.

So they set up Micah's carved image that he made as long as the house of God was at Shiloh. Did you pick up on that? Moses' grandson is in Judges chapter 17.

And as we read this sequentially, this activity here in Judges 17 should be right at the 400 year marker and yet what we find it actually traces all the way back to the beginning.

[10:33] And so the landscape of the book of Judges which is meant to draw attention to this moral collapse in the people, this final progression of a people who have given way completely to the nations and we think this is something that happens long into the future, we find it's actually happened right at the beginning.

And then in Judges chapter 20 verses 27 to 28, the people of Israel inquired of the Lord for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron ministered before in those days.

Not only Moses' grandson but Aaron's grandson is present in these chapters. We come to realize that when Joshua died the moral collapse had happened almost immediately.

Now that should be not only a warning to us but also a comfort. The warning is that a people had given way to the nations.

They had rejected and abandoned the Lord. We see that in Judges chapter 2 verses 8 to 10.

Joshua the son of Nun served in the Lord died at the age of 110 years.

[11:53] Then in verse 10 and all that generation were gathered to their fathers and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.

They abandoned the word of God. And so in verse 11 what do you find? And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and they served the Baals.

They abandoned the Lord the God of their fathers who had brought them out of the land of Egypt.

They went after the other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them and bowed down to them and they provoked the Lord to anger.

They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtore. This is Judges 17 to 21. Pulled all the way back to Judges chapter 2.

So it stands at the beginning this moral collapse and then at the end to try to emphasize how devastating this moral collapse was and yet all the way through from start to finish.

[13:03] While the people have abandoned God God has not abandoned his people. And the atrocities that you read about in Judges chapter 17 to 21 give us a window of how terrible this rebellion had become.

Give us a glimpse of how wicked the people had become. But in the darkest times when a nation completely abandons God God remains faithful to his people.

That's that's the message in summary. That's Judges from start to finish. A faithful God. He's faithful to his word regardless of a rebel people who continue to push him away.

Because when shepherds lose the word the people lose their way. But we have a good shepherd.

We're going to turn our attention to the good shepherd at the end of our message.

But I want you to see that Christ did not become the good shepherd in John chapter 10. He was the good shepherd from start to finish.

[14:19] I want you to see that the good shepherd carried his people from the very beginning. And I want to just touch on this so we can see how devastating this leadership shepherding vacuum had become in chapter 17 to 21.

And yet God continued to be faithful to his word to Abraham Isaac and Jacob and he continues to be faithful to his people today. So briefly first the shepherd and Joseph the shepherd and Joseph. You see God gave a word to Jacob Jacob who was the father of the the 12 tribes of Israel and God had promised Jacob that he would give him a land and Jacob through his wanderings he has these these positive parts of life and these negative parts of life and yet through all of it God remained faithful to Jacob.

So that through the course of the or at the end standing at the very end of his life when Jacob brings his sons his family to Egypt he is there in Egypt and he sees he sees Joseph his son his 11th son and we find in Genesis chapter 48 verses 3 and 4 Jacob will speak the wonder of God's promise when he says Jacob said to Joseph God almighty appeared to me at Lez in the land of Canaan and he blessed me and said to me behold I will make you fruitful and multiply you and I will excuse me and I will make of your company of people and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession and then he begins to mention why in verses 15 to 16 he says he blessed Joseph and said the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked the God who has been my shepherd all my life long

God had been Jacob's shepherd God had carried Jacob in spite of Jacob's failures he carried him he was faithful to his word he gets him to Egypt he lets him enjoy the benefits of a son who he

thought was dead and Ephraim and Manasseh who are the descendants or the sons of Joseph and he sees that God has remained faithful as a shepherd to his people well God has been Jacob's shepherd in the next scene in chapter 49 we see that now Jacob will bless his sons in chapter 49 verse 1 it says Jacob called his sons and said gather yourselves together that I might tell you what will happen to you in the days to come and then he speaks to each son individually but in verse 8 he comes to Judah he says Judah your brother shall praise you your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies your father's son shall bow down before you and then in verse 10 the scepter shall not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until the tribute comes to him and to him shall be the obedience of all the peoples

[17 : 34] God reveals to Jacob the promise that Judah will carry the kings David will be birthed from the tribe of Judah in fulfillment of this promise and then this to Joseph in verse 22 it says Joseph is a fruitful bough a fruitful bough by a spring his branches run over the wall the archers bitterly attacked him shot at him and harassed him severely yet his bow remained unmoved his arms were made agile by the hands of the mighty one of Jacob from there is the shepherd the stone of Israel why did Joseph succeed why did Joseph make it through into captivity why was Joseph established as the second in all of Egypt not because of Joseph's might or power but because of the shepherding gracious hand of God

God was shepherding his people the people grow and multiply in numbers they're in Egypt as you remember the story God raises up Moses as a deliverer Moses leads the people out of Egypt the people wander in the wilderness for 40 years they're just about ready to enter into the promised land and God tells Moses you're not going to go Moses it's going to be for somebody else to lead these people into the promised land and so Moses he looks to God what kind of leader will God raise up what kind of leader will Moses look for what we see in numbers chapter 27 verses 15 to 20 the kind of leader and we're going to see that the shepherd is embodied in Joseph this shepherd ministry of God himself is going to kind of take this form this pattern this example in Joshua who will be this kind of shepherding leader notice

Moses spoke to the Lord saying let the Lord the God of the spirits of all flesh appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them who shall lead them out and bring them in in that congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd so the Lord said to Moses take Joshua the son of none a man in whom is the spirit and lay your hand on him make him stand before Eliezer the priest and all the congregation and you shall commission him in their sight you shall invest him with some of the authority that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey Moses' prayer Lord let not your people be like sheep that have no shepherd and so God says okay I'm going to give you a shepherd a shepherd like me from among the people and the pattern that is set that we see in the book of Judges in the book of Deuteronomy in the book of Joshua we see this pattern of family headship this headship pattern of looking to the word reading the word loving the word teaching the word following the word this is the kind of leader the kind of shepherd that Joshua was supposed to be in setting this pattern as an example for the people what does the strategy of headship look like what kind of leader will God bless what kind of shepherd are we to be of course we come to Joshua chapter 1 verse 8 these are the marching orders!

follow the leader follow the good shepherd follow the chief shepherd Joshua and you can be a shepherd over my people Israel and so God blessed Joshua's ministry he blessed his life he blessed his shepherding role and the people flourished because of Joshua's leadership that was that was structured and built on the foundation of the word of God and the people flourished during his time we saw that in Judges chapter 2 and Joshua at the end of his life wants to instruct the people to continue the pattern to have family headship to follow after the Lord and so in Joshua chapter 24 verse 15 he says this choose this day whom you will serve whether the gods of your fathers served in the region beyond the river or the gods of the

[22 : 28] Amorites in whose land you dwell but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord that's the shepherding principle that's the family headship principle that's the principle that all of us are called to observe called to follow we we want to enjoy the benefits of what God has built for us his design for families his design for relationships his design for preservation not only of families and households by the way but as we're going to see that families and households will also help protect a nation and that when the family fails the nation will feel the effects and so we turn to Judges chapter 17 to 21 and we see this shepherding vacuum in Israel this total collapse in Israel

was due to the fact that the shepherds did not stand in the gap the shepherds did not lead the way they were called to lead they did not follow after the

Lord they did not observe the principle that was embedded in Deuteronomy chapter 6 to love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul with all your mind and then to teach those things to your children when they sit when they rise when they walk by the way that's the principle that God has called us to we see this vacuum in Israel and what they were called to was to lead in the same way as Joshua led using the word of God as the guide but there are three ways we see and there are so many others but we need to focus on three this morning to try to bring chapter 17 and 21 together for us three ways in which the shepherds failed and the first is this the shepherds are present but they are detached from the word the shepherds are there the heads of households are there the nation is present but they are completely detached from the what I find very interesting in chapters 17 to 21 is what

I could find and maybe you can correct me what I can find is the first mention of Levites in the entire book chapters 1 through 16 I don't see any mention of the word Levites and then you get to chapter 17 to 21 and 10 times you find the mention in the presence of Levites now why does that matter I think it matters for a number of reasons but I'm inclined to think that here are these judges these heads of families and they're supposed to be guided spiritually by the most spiritual among them the Levites were the ones who were set apart for ministry to God's people to lead them to consecrate them to help them in worship to sacrifice in their place to teach them the scriptures they were the designated party as it were the spiritual ones among

God's people and here they are the preeminent examples of this moral collapse of a nation who has abandoned God resident first in the very tribe that was meant to lead the people to him the Levites themselves chapter 17 verse 1 says there was a man in the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah and he said to his mother the eleven hundred pieces of silver that were taken from you about which you uttered a curse and also spoken in my ears behold the silver is with me and his mother said blessed be my son by the Lord and he restored the eleven hundred pieces of silver silver to the Lord from my hand for my son to make a carved image a carved image yeah a carved image and a metal image now therefore

I will restore it to you so so when he restored the money to his mother his mother took 200 pieces of silver gave it to the silver smith who made it into a carved image and the metal image and it was in the house of Micah and the man Micah had a shrine he made an ephod and household gods he ordained one of his sons who became his priest in those days there was no king in Israel everyone did what was right in their own eyes the tragedy the tragedy that's painted across the end of this narrative shepherds are present they're even invoking the name of the Lord Yahweh and yet I trust you can see how confused this people actually is they invoke the name of the Lord and then they set up gods and a shrine and they worship right there instead of worshiping Yahweh himself well this confusion seems to be isolated until you get to verse 7 now there was a young man of [27:52] Bethlehem in Judah of the family of Judah who was a Levite he sojourned there and the man departed from the town of Bethlehem in Judah to sojourn where he could find a place he sojourned he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah and Micah said to him hey where do you come from he says I'm a Levite of Bethlehem in Judah and I'm going to sojourn where I can find a place and Micah said hey stay with me and you can be a father to me and I will make you a priest I will give you ten pieces of silver a year and a suit of clothes for your living and the Levite he was going bananas berserk he thought what a great plan how is it that a Levite who is coming from the hill country or coming to the hill country of Ephraim and this is distant from us in terms of understanding well what's the significance of the hill country of Ephraim and in the sense the significance of it is that's where Shiloh was that's where the house or the tabernacle of God was established that's where worship was meant to happen and so here in the shadow of Shiloh is a man named Micah who is setting up his heathen worship and inviting a Levite from Judah to do the bidding for him how could a nation be so confused because they have been completely detached from the word of

God completely untethered from the scripture they didn't have any moral bearings they didn't have any instruction it was present but it was obviously not internalized and then in chapter 18 it's compounded by the fact that a tribe named Dan comes along they come through this area of the hill country they recognize the voice of this Levite and I don't know the text doesn't tell us how but they see this shrine they see this ephod they see this altar and it catches their attention now they're on a

journey because while they were given an allotment as Danites in a part of Israel they are exploring on their own because they've not been able to push the Canaanites out of land so they want to find a place that's a little easier to occupy they find this spot named

Laish they attack this place called Laish they dwell in this place called Laish and then they get this bright idea hey remember the shrine and the ephod and the household gods at Micah's house we need to bring that along and establish for ourselves a worship center for our tribe and that's exactly what they do we find that in chapter 17 verses 3 to 6 excuse me we find that in chapter 18 verses 19 to 20 they're approaching now this young Levite and they say to him hey keep quiet put your hand on your mouth and come with us and be to us a father and a priest is it better for you to be a priest to the house of one man or to be a priest to a tribe and a clan in Israel and the priest's heart was glad he took the ephod and the household gods and the carved image and went along with the people and they established a brand new worship center that was separate from the worship center that God had established in Shiloh so that you get to chapter 18 verses 30 to 31 and you find the people of

Dan set up the carved image for themselves and Jonathan who is now named he was this young Levite who's been anonymous up to this point now he's named Jonathan the son of Gershom son of Moses and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land so they set up Micah's carved image that he made as long as the house of God was at Shiloh now you have two worship centers two competing worship centers and a Levite Jonathan son of Moses and his family now lead the show the shepherds are present but they're detached from the word the word is not moving his people second sin moves from the household to the nation because no shepherd stops it we saw a glimpse of that in chapter 17 and 18 we saw this young Levite this household in Micah's house this household in the corruption that's taking place and we're meant to see that as corruption happens within a person it never remains isolated it never stays put corruption in a heart always grows it always spreads it always corrupts those around you Paul will use this principle when he says a little leaven leavens the whole lump that's the principle we need to understand so cut the sin off at the root don't allow it to grow we see the same kind of principle happening in chapters 19 to 21 it says in chapter 19 in those days there was no king in Israel a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah his concubine from Bethlehem in Judah excuse me his concubine!

[33:45] verse 2 was unfaithful to him and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah and was there for some four months her husband arose went after her to speak kindly to her and bring her back he had with him his servants and a couple of donkeys and she brought him into her father's house and when the girl's father saw him he came with joy to meet him this initial picture of what we find again happening with another Levite in the hill country of Ephraim starts small it begins with a household and as you continue to read through the story you realize that the difficulties that are taking place here the conflict that's implicit here we see that in verse 2 it says the translation is his concubine was unfaithful to him and you might see the little note underneath if you're using the ESV the Septuagint

Old Latin says became angry with something's happening there and the translators aren't quite sure whether she was unfaithful to him or she was angry because he was unfaithful to her we don't know but there's conflict in the home conflict is unresolved she leaves she goes to her father's house he waits four months and then finally goes to retrieve her and through the course of events what then transpires begins to look really good as a father is expressing a measure of hospitality but then turns really dark really quick they move out from the father's house they bypass Jerusalem because they want to go into a region and spend the evening in a place that they consider safe a place that's not familiar with Canaan a place that is not entrenched in foreign lands they want a place that is familiar with the nation of

Israel so they go to Gibeah which is where the tribe of Benjamin would be and the description of everything that takes place in Gibeah at the end of chapter 19 is intentionally meant to remind you of what happens in Sodom and Gomorrah you overlay Judges chapter 19 on top of Genesis chapter 19 and the language is virtually identical we're meant to see that that Canaan has gotten in to Israel that the people of Israel are beginning to act like the wicked individuals of Sodom and Gomorrah an atrocity will take place there at the end of Judges chapter 19 and the Levite will not protect he will not defend he will not go to bat for this concubine he allows her to be essentially

murdered at his front door and his indifference is captured in the scenario the scene we see that in verse 28 he says to her as she's laying there at the step get up and let us be going no sensitivity just indifference and because of the abuse that she's experienced she dies and in his revenge or in his heart of trying to correct the issue the injustice that's taken place he takes the issue to the nation what started small what has started with the household now grows to a nation you see sin will move from the household to a nation because no one was there to stop it finally religion remains but submission to Yahweh disappears religion remains but submission to Yahweh disappears now that may seem like a strong statement especially if you're familiar with

Judges chapter 20 this man will approach the nation of Israel we find that in chapter 20 verse 1 all the people of Israel came out from Dan to Beersheba including the land of Gibeah and the congregation assembled as one man to the Lord at Mizpah the chiefs of all the people and all the tribes of Israel presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God and 400,000 men on foot drew the sword and the people of Benjamin heard that the people of Israel had gone up to Mizpah and the people of Israel said tell us how this evil happened and then the Levite will recount this story of what's just taken place and what's fascinating as you work your way through this chapter is you do have a group of individuals who inquire of the Lord Yahweh what they should do to deal and punish the nation or the tribe of the Benjamites and on three occasions they go up we find that beginning in verse 18 the people of Israel arose they went up to Bethel they inquired of God who shall go up for us to fight against the people of Benjamin and the Lord said Judah shall go up first you're inquiring of the Lord we find again they inquire of the Lord a second time and then a third time and in verse 27 we see the people of Israel inquired of the Lord for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron ministered before in those days saying shall we go out once more to battle against our brothers the people of Benjamin or shall we cease up and they virtually extinguish or annihilate the entire tribe of Benjamin all but 600 men are killed and then they try to sort out their mess in chapter 21 how are they going to sort out this mess how are they going to ensure that a tribe of [40:24] Benjamin one of one of God's tribes that he's promised blessing to how will they ensure! that that tribe continues to flourish and in chapter 21 while there has been so much approaching of God in chapter 20 there is there's no insight that's given by the Lord in chapter 21 so that the summary statement that's given to us about the true hearts and the true nature of the people is given to us in chapter 21 verse 25 in those days there was no king in Israel everyone did what was right in their own eyes you see religion remains but true submission to Yahweh has disappeared altogether but in spite of all that we recognize and understand the faithfulness of the Lord that he has not abandoned his people and we fast forward to the

New Testament we fast forward to the first century we fast forward to what God has done through his son Jesus and the promise in Matthew chapter 2 verse 6 it says this and you O Bethlehem in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel and then in John chapter 10 verse 11 Jesus himself says this I am the good shepherd the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep and then in verse 17 for this reason the father loves me because I lay down my life that I may take it up again no one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it Judges chapter 17 to 21 that won't be the first time that

Israel will go through a very dark period of rebellion against the Lord the monarchy will come and go and as a result of the rebellion of the people God will then sell his people into the hand of the Babylonians and into the Assyrians because of the same kind of thing and yet the faithfulness of God to his word continues to sustain them that's how we get to John chapter 10 that's how we get to Matthew chapter 2 the faithfulness of a God to shepherd his people is dependent upon the good shepherd himself we have a good shepherd I wonder this morning do you know do you know the good shepherd do you have a personal relationship with the good shepherd of his sheep who knows his sheep by name the intimacy of the good shepherd his presence among his people that's what the good shepherd desires and that's what the good shepherd

Jesus Christ himself has made available through his son Jesus Christ who died on the cross and rose again and made a way made a way for rebel!

sheep to find their way back to the shepherd I wonder this morning if you've given your life to that good shepherd if you've come to a place of recognizing your need for him that only comes through faith in Jesus Christ!

[44:31] Amen