

The God who Shepherds

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[0 : 00] All right, let's pray. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening.

In Christ's name, amen. At this point, I normally say, let me add my welcome to Jordan. But he's away at Thanksgiving, so let me add my welcome to myself and welcome you here.

See, that wasn't awkward at all. If you're new, my name is Aaron. I'm a minister for this service. We are going through Ezekiel, and I'm just like loving Ezekiel every week.

Just blows me away. It's fantastic. So here we are. We're at a sermon. So the Bible, as you've gathered over these, goodness, maybe like eight or nine weeks we've been in Ezekiel, is full of images that God gives us to describe who he is and who we are in relation to him.

So we have God the Father, and we're his children. We have God the King, and we're his servants. We have God Creator, the creation. God Lover, the beloved. But here we find one of the most common analogies used to describe the relationship between God and us, and that is shepherd and sheep.

[1 : 20] We call sheep about 400 times in the Bible. Ezekiel 34, though, here, what we've just heard read wonderfully, is I think the longest and most detailed use of that image.

And here is what we learn from the text. We learn that there are two big problems, and that there is one big solution to them. So first, the first problem.

The first problem is this. It's humanity's sheepiness. It's totally a word. When you hear the sheep-shepherd thing, I wonder if you tend to go a little bit soft focus and think about rolling hills and little blue ponds and like a frog on a thing on a pond and some sheep.

Bouncing. And they're beautiful, perfectly white sheep. And then maybe over a hill wanders a shepherd, holding, you know, like the sheep around, the little lamby, little whammy around its neck, you know, kind of wandering over, and everything's just lovely.

I am from New Zealand. And it's a country of 4 million people and 39 million sheep.

[2 : 40] That's a true story. As stats as of this year, 39 million. We eat a lot of sheep, and that's just to stop them from taking over, to be honest. But I can tell you, this kind of picture of rolling hills and perfectly white sheep and all that carry on, it is the reality of animal husbandry as it relates to sheep is very different.

When the Bible calls you a sheep, says you're like sheep, don't mistake that for like a fun, nice, pleasant thing the Bible is saying to you, okay?

It is an insult to call you a sheep. Sheep are stupid and dirty animals. The passage says that the sheep have to feed them.

It's because they're too dumb to find their own food. It talks about them being preyed on by wild animals. It's because they're completely defenseless. The text talks about them getting sick.

They're just filthy. I mean, all this stuff on the back. They get, they, they, nowadays you actually have to submerge sheep often in these very powerful chemicals to rid them of lice and mites and blowfly and ticks, which can just infest them.

[4 : 05] Sheep get lost. They just wander off, sometimes to their death. If you go around New Zealand and you hike around cliffs, at the bottom of cliffs, it's not unusual to find bones at the bottom of cliffs. They're sheep that have just kind of, they just walk off cliffs.

They're not smart creatures. And here's the thing, is that like, let's say a shepherd will go off and try and, let's say a sheep's gone missing, right? Larry has gone missing.

So a shepherd goes off to find Larry. And you know the picture of Jesus with the lamb around the neck? Look at that. Next time you see that picture, you probably notice that the feet of the sheep are tied up.

That's because the sheep are so dumb that a sheep that wanders off, that is in danger, facing death, no grass, defenseless, will resist coming back to the pasture.

Will go, no, I don't want to go, you know, leave me alone. Will try and escape. And so the shepherd has to tie the sheep up to get it back to a place where it's safe. They do not willingly come to where there is food and protection.

[5 : 11] So, so behold, the Bible's picture of humanity. Now, remember, the scriptures give us many analogies to describe us, okay?

And if we rely on just one, that's really unhelpful. That's why it gives us a whole lot of pictures of that relationship.

A reminder, we are also called sons and daughters. We are also called beloved. We are also called the bride of Christ.

In this passage, though, it's dealing with the Bible's picture of us as sheep. And it's saying that we have a problem. We're like sheep.

We're like sheep. And a big part of coming to God is recognizing that sheepiness about us, that sheepness that we have. And recognizing that we are in great need of a shepherd, which leads to problem number two.

[6 : 23] I mean, we could talk a lot more about that, but I think you get the gist of what it's saying about us. We can't find our way back to the pastures. And even when it seems like it's fairly obvious, our hearts resist it.

Problem number two, human shepherds. So the first problem highlighted in the text is we are like sheep. The next problem is the failure of human shepherds to guide us. So remember, the context of Ezekiel is Judah, Babylon, about 600 BC.

So Judah, for about 500 years before the writing of this, had approximately 40 kings. Of those, so the shepherds are the leaders, right?

Of those 40 kings, three of them were pretty good. The rest of them led Judah away from God. And that's what the first 10 verses are about. They're an indictment against those shepherds.

Here's a list of failures, starting in verse 1. I mean, they're doing the opposite of what a shepherd should do. Verse 4, sorry. 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 ruled them.

[7 : 34] So they were scattered. And what's the problem with these shepherds? It's just, it's just the problem of people often. It's self-centeredness. Verse 2.

Ah, shepherds of Israel. You've been feeding yourselves. Shouldn't you feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves in the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, and you don't feed the sheep. Self-interest. Self-interest when given power, what does it lead to? It leads to exploitation. So these kings and leaders that were over the people of Judah, instead of feeding and protecting the sheep, they killed the best ones, scattered the rest.

So stepping back from the analogy here, this is what happened to God's people at the time of Ezekiel's writings. Kings were spiritual, moral failures, and they led the people away from God, and they led that place into injustice, and social collapse, and idolatry, and as a result, the people were scattered and exposed to great danger.

Now today, there are still shepherds shepherds who fleece the flock. Ministers who, who for personal advantage, money, status, power trips, some kind of weird identity thing, fleece the flock.

[8 : 57] I googled a couple of days ago, worst pastors in the world. I mean, it was, it was a dumb idea, it was so depressing. Lots of disturbing stuff.

But then there was these ludicrous things as well, like a guy who ran a church in another country, and he wrote a letter to his congregants, this is last year, saying that he needed, on top of what they would normally give to the church, an extra \$52, this kind of one-off \$52, which he described as a transportation seed.

And the idea is, it's in a kind of a prosperity kind of gospel thing, where you kind of can give money, and you can get special favors from God. And this, in the letter it said, he said, if you sent the money in, you would get a special favor from God, related to your vehicle, in 52 days, or 52 weeks. And it turns out, the money was going towards replacing the blades on his personal helicopter. So, folks, there are plenty of bad leaders out there today, that lead for their own advantage, instead of, the costly work, of caring for the spiritually sick, the stray, the lost.

And you could apply this to, leaders outside of Christian ministry, of course. And it wouldn't be an exaggeration, to say that there is, a real crisis in leadership, in the world today.

[10:24] Now, what is God's response, to this situation? The crisis, of terrible shepherds, leading sheep, who desperately need a shepherd.

Verse 10 is God's response, and it's uncompromising. He says, thus says the Lord God, behold, I am against the shepherds. Very strong words. I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hands, and I'll put a stop, to their feeding the sheep.

No longer, shall the shepherds feed themselves. This line, I am against the shepherds, that kind of sentence, is normally reserved, for foreign enemy nations, the nations that are enemies, of God's people.

But here, God is saying, through Ezekiel, these leaders of my people, have become enemies of my people. And God says, I'm going to remove them, and I'm going to put an end, to the monarchy. It's a disaster. Which is, you know, a good chunk of the reason, behind the exile to Babylon. So friends, that's kind of much, the first ten verses there.

[11:33] It's essentially about our sheepness, and the failure of human shepherds. Two really big problems. Now part three, God's solution. What is God's solution to all this?

Well, have a look at, it's in verse 11 there. God says, I'll do this myself. That's the solution. Because of your sheepness, I'll come and shepherd the sheep.

Now listen to what he says he will do. I'll read it. It's the exact opposite, of the terrible shepherds.

Verse 11, I myself will search for my sheep, and seek them out. 12, I will seek out my sheep, and rescue them.

14, I will feed them with good pasture. 15, I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I myself will make them, lie down, declares the Lord. 16, I will seek the lost, I'll bind up the injured, I will strengthen the weak, the fat and the strong I'll destroy.

I'll feed them in justice. Where the kings of Judah have failed, God will reign, and God will rescue, and God will heal.

[12:34] And that rule will be marked by an ingathering. There's a gathering in. It's the gathering in of God's people, which has become the church today. There is a tending, and a feeding, which our hearts desperately need, and there is justice.

Because there is no future hope, without justice. And this justice, is not just directed at the shepherds, in this text.

If you sort of look in the middle here, it's actually directed to other sheep as well. Because in a corrupt system, bullies rise up, from amongst just normal folks.

And this is what happened here. This is the stuff in the middle, that you might not have grasped immediately. It's in verse 17. As for you, my flock, says the Lord God, behold, I will judge between sheep and sheep, between ram and goat.

So he's saying, that in amongst my people, these guys doing bad stuff, who are flourishingly, who are flourishing, in their badness, in this corrupt system.

[13:37] Is it not enough for you, to feed on the good pasture? You must tread down with your feet, the rest of the pasture, and drink of clear water, that you must muddy, the rest of the water for your feet. So he's talking about these bullies here.

Now, if you are, a bit new to all this Christianity stuff, verse 23, might be a bit confusing. Because God has just said, I will rule.

I'm taking over here. I will shepherd my sheep. I am going to do this. And then in verse 23, it says, I will set over them, one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them.

Hang on. I don't understand. God said he's going to do it, but now he's saying, somebody called David is going to do it. Well, it's King David. You probably have heard of him. And at this point in the Bible, David is dead.

So what's he talking about here? Well, it's a prophecy. God is saying, I'm going to send myself in the form of someone descended from David.

[14:39] And it's a prophecy fulfilled in Christ. If you went to John 10, here's what you'd read. Starting from verse 7.

So Jesus said to them, truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers. So he's talking about the future, the previous kings, right?

Thieves and robbers. Sheep didn't listen to them. I am the door. Anyone who enters by me, he will be saved and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and destroy.

I came that they might have life and have it abundantly. And here's the big line here. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Verse 14.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, I lay down my life for the sheep. So Jesus, a descendant of David, the genealogies say, is God amongst us.

[15:46] Is God. And in this sermon, when he says, I am the good shepherd, he's talking back to Ezekiel. He's throwing their minds back to Ezekiel, back to this passage right here.

And the folks listening to him would have known that. I mean, he's not just picking out some random idea. He's not looking around and thinking, oh, there's a lot of farmers around. You know, I see a lot of sheep around here.

I'll pick up on something that they'll think is friendly. It'll make me, it's a good, like this will be a cool image. Like I'll be the shepherd guy. No, he's pulling into the Old Testament.

He's drawing out of it and saying, the shepherd that Ezekiel talks about, that's me. And by saying that, he's saying, I am God. And the tasks of the shepherd, I am going to do.

And we know that's what he means because shortly after these verses, if you keep reading, the religious leaders of the day pick up stones and try and kill him. Because they know what he's saying.

[16:46] And in their mind, he's blaspheming. Jesus is the fulfillment of this Ezekiel promise. And how does he differ from the self-interested kings of Judah? Well, it says in John 10, you know, instead of grasping after power, he's going to lay down his life for the sheep.

Folks, back in the days, shepherding was a dangerous business. Wild beasts, you know, wild beasts, they see a big flock of sheep. What do they see? They see, they just see buffet.

They just see buffet. They just see meat. Go after it. And what's standing between them and the buffet is a shepherd. So the wolves go after the sheep.

And what do they get? Well, they get Jesus. Jesus is the meal. Of course, this is the cross here. We're not talking about real wolves.

There would have been real wolves back in the day, but what's a real wolf for us? It's our sin. That's our great enemy. It's our own selfishness which we can't overcome. It's our own sense of wanting to be at the center of our universe.

[17:55] That's really hard to overcome that inclination. In fact, it's impossible. So Jesus takes the punishment for that for that sin in our life.

He stands between us and the wolf. That's why in Hebrews he's called the great shepherd and why in Peter he's called the chief shepherd. So our sheepiness, that's a problem.

That's a really big problem. Bad shepherding, gee, that's a really big problem as well. But both those problems are met through Christ. That's not all the passage says.

It casts our eye into a future, one that we will not experience now, but we will experience glimpses of it, but one we will see in its fullness when Christ returns.

And that's what verses 25 to 31 are about. Just look at that. Just slide your eyes over there. But let me read the first bit of it, 25. I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods.

[19:00] And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing and I will send down the showers in their season and they shall be showers of blessing and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit and the earth shall yield its increase and they shall be secure in the land and they shall know that I am the Lord.

So this is talking about when Christ returns. Okay. So the covenant of peace but at the start, that peace word, that's a very important Bible word. It's the Hebrew word shalom. Now if you're looking for a wider definition of shalom, really this will give you a fairly fair idea using a kind of a farmy kind of harvesty kind of picture to describe it.

Okay. But here it describes a wholeness in every area of God's creation. Shalom is multifaceted. There is freedom from conflict and the relation between you and creation.

Like the animals aren't out to kill you. There's freedom from conflict in your relationship with God. You shall know that I am God, it says. There's freedom in the relationship between you and everyone else.

There's going to be peace. This new place will be a place where you'll be secure, where justice will reign, where you will live fulfilling, peaceful, productive lives, all in complete peace with God, with others, and with God's creation.

[20 : 22] This is God's plan. This is what shalom looks like. That's life under the good shepherd. That's a life which all Christians will inherit.

Let me wrap up. Folks, you've heard the passage? What do you take home? What do you pray about? That's the thing I'd like you to do. I'd love you to pray about this. But what do you pray about?

I'd say, first of all, pray about your sheepiness. If you are here and you're not Christian, one of the first things the Bible teaches us about is this, that brokenness touches every area of your life.

Now, that does not mean that you're as bad as you can be in every area of your life, but it does mean that every single area of your life to various degrees is touched by brokenness.

We are like lost sheep, sick sheep, defenseless sheep. And we're not always aware of our great need or that brokenness. And we need a good shepherd to lead us to good pastures.

[21 : 33] You know, stepping back from the analogy here that our hearts long for security and meaning and without God, we grasp at a whole lot of things, trying to find that, trying to establish that in our lives.

And, you know, some of those things end up actually harming us. So if you were here and you're not a Christian, my suggestion to you would be, you'd be to pray to God and say, God, convince me of my brokenness.

I need to know if that's real or not. Because that is a, that's a difficult place to get to. But would you pray? Would you pray that God would reveal that in your hearts? That you're in need of a shepherd?

A good shepherd? Now, if you're here and you are a Christian, what do you, what do you pray about? Well, you should pray about that stuff as well. But also, I pray this, you know, like, one of the things in this passage that it talks about is it talks about an exchange of leadership from dysfunctional leader to God's leadership in your life.

Folks, have you made that exchange fully? one of the tests would be this. Do you come to Jesus only in crisis?

[22 : 45] Only when things are really bad? Or do you come to him at all times? That's probably a fairly good test and a challenging one when I think about my life.

If he is the good shepherd, if he is the one good shepherd, surely we should trust in him for everything.

Do you have competing leaders in your life that are pulling you in a few different directions? Folks, you need one shepherd, one good shepherd.

Give it all to him. I'm going to finish now with a prayer. It's a prayer from Psalm 23. Somebody's going to come and pray for us after this, but I want to begin that prayer time with this psalm and ask that as I read it, this would be a prayer of your heart.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

[23 : 53] He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his namesake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me.

You're right on your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen. Would you remain in a posture of prayer while Katie comes to pray for us?