

The God who Shepherds

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[0 : 00] Well, if you take your Bibles and open to Ezekiel 34 on page 722, this is the longest section in all the Bible on the sheep-shepherd metaphor, which is probably the most comprehensive and intimate of all the metaphors in terms of who God is and who we are, how he feels about us and acts towards us and we to him, Ezekiel 34, page 722.

It's a great passage to look at on the first Sunday of Advent as things get darker and colder because God puts himself forward as the shepherd of the sheep at the lowest possible point when all hope has been extinguished.

Back in the very last chapter, verse 21 of 33, news comes from Jerusalem that Jerusalem has been utterly raised to the ground.

The temple, the city, it's every institution that the people of Israel had set up as idols has been devastated and destroyed. And I can't think of a lower point in the history of Israel.

Lower than slavery in Egypt, lower than the division of the kingdom. This is Jerusalem, the temple, it is gone and therefore all hope for the exiles is now gone.

[1 : 29] And I don't think that's too far away from the current mood in the West, particularly amongst the young. I think there's a sense of stagnation and powerlessness.

There seems to be so much wrong in the world and so much we just cannot fix and so little hope. And I'm not just talking about the environment or economies or inequities, but there is almost a cynicism about hope today.

And it's at this point that God puts himself forward as the shepherd of his flock. And in this chapter, God tells us two things.

One is that the problem is much worse than you think. And that what God is doing by offering himself to us is much better than we could imagine. And I've just got two points.

The first is our need for a shepherd king. And the second is the gift of the shepherd king. So firstly then, our need for a shepherd king.

[2 : 33] And I don't think most of us think this way, do we? I mean, we don't think we really need a shepherd. We don't really want to be dependent on others. We particularly don't like other people telling us what to do.

But there are three reasons in this chapter why we need a shepherd king. And the first is because we're sheep. Look at the last verse of the passage.

And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God. It's almost funny at the end of 30 verses on the sheep shepherd picture for God to say, you humans are sheep.

It's almost as though we're too stupid and stubborn to get it. Sheep are obstinate, foolish, reckless, needy, without knowing it.

And I've said this before, and I'll say it again. You know that whenever God says he's our shepherd and we are his sheep, it is not a compliment. It's not a fluffy, sentimental, soft, lamby picture.

[3 : 35] It's a picture of absolute dependence and care for everything, food, water, protection, guidance, direction.

It is a picture of utter spiritual helplessness and stupidity, as well as the kindness and goodness of God to take us on.

And I am now over-educated in sheep after this. Well, I'm not really. There's probably people here who might have grown up on a sheep farm. But did you know that sheep are the most helpless and vulnerable of all animals?

Left to themselves, they do stupid things and die. They wander off and they get lost. They are unlike any other animal when they run away because they cannot fend themselves.

Every other animal, if it runs away, either turns feral or comes home. But sheep, when they run away, they don't go wild.

[4 : 32] They're not able to defend themselves from attack from other animals. And a sheep can be within visual distance from its home paddock and still be lost.

I'm telling you the truth. Not no way back. And they are completely undiscerning. They get lost and they go to the wrong places and they put themselves in the path of predators.

They scatter when what they really need to do is to gather. They cannot find food for themselves. They will eat absolutely anything that's put in front of them, including what will kill them.

And if they're in their own field, they graze the grass right to the ground until it cannot grow back and they are helpless again. I discovered this week that if you put sheep between a still, muddy, disgusting pool of muck and running water, they panic at the running water.

Even though it's fresh and good for them, they panic at the running water and will drink the muck. Which is why the psalm that we sang already, he leads me beside still waters. In the Hebrew, it is he leads me beside the waters of rest.

[5 : 47] Because we don't even know how to rest for ourselves. John Stott, who owned a property in Wales next to a sheep farm, I've read this before, said, sheep are not at all the clean, cuddly creatures they may appear.

They are dirty, subject to unpleasant pests and regularly need to be dipped in strong chemicals to rid them of lice, ticks and worms. They are unintelligent, wayward and obstinate. I hesitate to apply this metaphor too closely and characterize the people of God as dirty, lousy or stupid.

But this is who we are spiritually. We have no clue what is best for us. We keep consuming things that are self-destructive.

We desperately need God as our shepherd. And I'm not making this up. I'm not trying to insult you. Some of you may think, I'm coming to church and I'm getting insulted here. But the very fact that you think you're too clever and too sophisticated to imagine yourself as a sheep is a very sheep-like thing to do.

Do you go to receive? We have to receive this or else the rest of the Bible doesn't make sense. Forgive me for putting it.

[6 : 58] We have to embrace our own sheepishness, as it were. We constantly consume what's bad. We don't recognize what's good. We wander into treacherous places. We cannot find our way back to God.

Spiritually, we are defenseless and dependent and we desperately need a shepherd king. That's the first reason. We're sheep. The second is because of bad human shepherds. Because the sad truth is that human leadership always fails.

And within Israel, within the people of God, God had delegated some of his shepherd leadership to prophets, priests and kings. And here in this passage, he is particularly targeting kings and he calls them under shepherds of his people.

And the story of the Old Testament and the story of every civilization and every culture is the failure of leadership. So in verses 1 to 10, we have a blistering indictment of the shepherds of Israel and human leadership.

Just look at verse 2. Verse 2. Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel and say to them, even to the shepherds, thus says the Lord God, ah, shepherds of Israel.

[8 : 07] I think it ought to be something like, ah, shepherds of Israel. Well, you've been feeding yourselves. Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat.

You clothe yourselves with the wool. You slaughter the fat ones. You do not feed the sheep. 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, etc., etc.

The shepherds have failed to care for the flock. Because the failure of leadership is the failure to serve. It's the desire to be served rather than to serve others.

The shepherds in Israel were shepherd-focused, not sheep-focused. They weren't really concerned for the welfare of the sheep. They were self-serving, not sheep-serving.

And they twisted the job of feeding the sheep into fleecing the sheep and feeding themselves. And they'd done it with abuse and power and harshness. So God steps in.

[9 : 07] Verse 10. Thus says the Lord God, behold, I am against the shepherds. I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. So the Bible teaches two things about

our human institutions, our cultural, government, state institutions.

Number one, they're a gift from God. They're given by God to us for our good. We ought to participate in them. We ought to be active in them. But it also says, secondly, on the other hand, that human institutions and human leaders can never give us what only God can.

We should never look to human leaders. We should never look to human institutions for the blessing of God. Because every shepherd is a sheep, just like you and me. We're all marked by the same spiritual self-destructive impulses and neediness.

That's why there is a constant leadership crisis in every culture. It was so in ancient Israel. It was a disaster, the leadership in Israel. They'd had 500 years of kings.

They'd had 43 kings. You know how many of them were half good? Three. That includes David, who used his kingship for adultery and murder.

[10:26] We need a shepherd king not just because we're sheep, but because of bad human shepherds. But there's a third reason we need a shepherd king, and that is the other sheep.

In verses 17 to 19, you'll notice that there are even some within the flock that you have to watch out for. They're a fat sheep who have the same disease as these human shepherds.

They lack care for the other sheep. They use the sheep for their own selfish ends. They bully their way to the good water first and then trample it for others. In their greed, they trample on the grass that they're using.

They push it out of the way, and they try to get to the head of the butting order. That was a joke, and it comes from a wonderful commentary of about 900 pages, and I thought I wanted to mention it because in 900 pages, a joke is a very good thing.

See, we need a shepherd king who's somehow not infected with this same disease, who's outside somehow because we cannot look to each other for this kind of provision and protection and guidance.

[11:35] You can't look to your spouse. You can't look to your ministers. You can't look to your parents. You can't look to political leaders. They're all sheep. We're all sheep. We cannot give each other what we really need.

I'll give you one current example. Was there a president of the United States who was elected with higher hopes and expectations than President Obama? It doesn't matter where you are politically or what you think he has achieved in his presidency, but many of those who were key to having him elected in the first place now publicly say how disappointed they are in him.

The Washington Post calls him the disappointee-in-chief. 50% of Americans now either disapprove or are disappointed with Obama. The black leaders who wept at his inauguration have now come out publicly saying that they're heartbroken.

There's no evidence of corruption or fraud. It's just human leadership cannot lead us into the promised land. There's no united initiative that can deliver what God promises.

We need a divine. We need a shepherd king. We're sheep. We've got bad shepherds. And there are other sheep with the same disease. And so we move to the second point.

[12:52] And this is, it's just amazing. Because the main thrust of the passage is about the gift of the shepherd king. I hope you felt as it was read, God steps in and he says, I, I'm going to do this.

I'm going to be your shepherd. And he tells us three things about the gift of the shepherd king. And the first is, it's deeply personal. Four times God says, I myself will step in.

Just look, for example, at verse 15. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. My sheep, my sheep, my sheep, all the way through. I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God.

So God himself steps in and says, I'm not going to, I'm not just going to deliver you from the wild beasts and the enemies. I'm going to deliver you from the damage and the ruin that your leaders and other sheep and you bring on yourself.

Verse 16. I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strayed. I will bind up the injured. I will strengthen the weak and the fat and the strong. I will destroy.

[14:06] All the things that human shepherds promised but cannot deliver. God himself takes responsibility for. And the thing about this is that God does the opposite of disappoint.

He satisfies. When we foolishly wander off and get ourselves lost, he seeks us out. When we're tangled up and caught chasing things that are harmful, he brings us back.

He gathers us when we're off on our own. When we're hungry and don't know where to go for food and we're consuming all sorts of things that are vile for us, he feeds, he provides.

When you've been injured, through no fault of your own or through fault of your own, he binds us up. When we're spiritually hungry and weak and don't know where to turn, he strengthens us. When we're spiritually thirsty and sluggish and lethargic, we don't know what we're doing, he makes us lie down. He makes us lie down because we don't even know how to rest properly for ourselves. [15:07] And when facing the wolf of death itself, he comes beside, he overwhelms our enemy and he gathers us to himself. This is the gift of the shepherd. And if you go through the second half of this chapter, as you might want to this afternoon, God says, I will, I will, I will.

I count 27 times. It's his initiative, not just because of our need, but because of his love. He cares for us.

He serves us. He gives us what only he can give. So the gift of the shepherd king is first personal. And secondly, it's perfect. Because what God promises to do is comprehensive.

It's not just focused on me as a sheep. It's comprehensive and global and eternal. He's not just going to feed and tend us. He's not just going to protect us and rescue us when we wander off. The rescue he speaks about here is permanent and perfect, eternal, eradicating every threat, creating a new world which is perfect for sheep to be with their shepherd.

[16:17] And I think that's the point of verses 25 to 31, the last paragraph. The key idea here is security, but it's not just a negative security, you know, protection.

It's positive shalom. It's peace and harmony and satisfaction and plenty. It's what our world has lost. It's where hope is lost. Shalom. And I read these verses during the week and I realized we have to read these as sheep.

These verses don't make sense unless you read them as a sheep. So take verse 25. I will make with them a covenant of peace, a covenant of shalom, and I will banish wild beasts from the land so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods.

You might think that's a nice, nice for a holiday idea. What God is promising is a return to the pristine goodness of the Garden of Eden where all oppression and all cruelty is dealt with.

And if you're a sheep and you know there are no wild beasts around, the wilderness and the woods suddenly become places to explore, places of discovery, you see.

[17:30] Are you with me? See, verse 27, have a look at. Take this in as a sheep. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit. The earth shall yield its increase. They'll be secure in the land. Did you know that sheep love fruit?

Something else I found in my research this week. They eat lots of grass, but I'm guessing you eat the same grass all the time and it gets pretty dull. I found a farmer this week who said that their sheep love mangoes, grapes, tomatoes, green beans, and cucumbers.

For a sheep, this new place is perfect. And it's not just once off, it's plenty. It goes on and on. Verse 29, I'll provide for them renowned plantations.

The word renowned is the word rest, sorry, peace, shalom. I'll provide for them plantations of shalom. You're going to eat shalom so that they're no longer consumed by hunger in the land. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God with them. So it's not just a promise of personal peace and tranquility. It's a whole new world where all that steals hope has dealt with, has been dealt with, and God replaces it with himself.

[18:47] Don't you think this is what our world longs for? Don't you think this is what we long for? Years ago, Douglas Coupland wrote in his book, *Life After God*, he tells us his secret.

He says, I tell it to you with an openness of heart and I doubt I shall never ever achieve again. I pray you're in a quiet room to hear these words. My secret is that I need God.

I'm sick. I can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give because I no longer seem capable of giving. To help me be kind, I no longer seem capable of kindness.

To help me love, I seem beyond being able to love. He's longing for a shepherd king. God's offer to us to be our shepherd king is personal and perfect.

And thirdly, it's deeply painful. Did you notice in verses 23 and 24, there's a twist in the passage, a tension in the passage? The whole of the rest of the passage, God keeps saying, I will, I will, I will, I'm going to be the shepherd.

[19:49] But in verse 23 and 24, he says something different. He says, I will set up 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. And my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord.

I have spoken. See, there's only one God and there's only one flock. And God says, I myself will shepherd the people. And here he says, I'm going to set over them another shepherd, one shepherd, my servant David.

And whoever this shepherd is, in verse 23, he set over the people. And in verse 24, he is among the flock. So whatever he's going to provide, he must be one of us as well as come from God.

And he must be born of David's line. Is it God or is it David? Somehow God is going to send a descendant of David who will shepherd the sheep. The way in which God is going to personally take over shepherding is through this servant shepherd.

[20 : 58] 500 years this is. Before the coming of Jesus Christ. And as you know, if you open the New Testament, the first words in the New Testament are these. The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David.

And when Jesus, you know, in his ministry, he sees the crowd, he has compassion because they're confused and helpless. Like sheep without a shepherd. And then when we come to John's gospel in chapter 10, Jesus explicitly takes this passage and applies it to himself.

And he says, I am the good shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep. Which is not just a nice sentimental thing for him to say, but he's saying, I'm God.

I am the one shepherd. And we know that because the immediate reaction of the Jewish leaders to him were to pick up rocks to stone him and they said to him, blasphemy, you have blasphemed because you're a man and you're making yourself God.

He wasn't claiming just to be a good shepherd, but the true shepherd. He's saying, I'm God. I've come to seek you and save you and to bring you back and to care for you forever. The amazing way is that the way in which Jesus shepherds us is the opposite of human shepherds.

[22 : 20] The way he rescues us and brings us home is that he lays down his life for the sheep. If you can stay with me, the shepherd becomes the sacrificial lamb.

He does not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life for us. He's a radically sheep-focused shepherd. He faces the wolf himself and is devoured and he does it with gentleness and care, not with abuse, but by receiving abuse.

Because, you see, to be the true shepherd, if you're a true shepherd, you realize that your greatest treasure is in your sheep. That's where your value is.

You don't have stocks and shares and money in the bank. The treasure is in the sheep. That's why God uses this picture. That's why he'll leave 99 and go out after the one.

And I think this passion and value that God puts on us comes through every line of Ezekiel 34. We are his treasure. When God takes on the personal being our shepherd, he does it not just personally and not just perfectly, but knowing it'll be deeply painful because his son will lose his own life to rescue us.

[23 : 38] And I imagine that the original hearers who heard this just thought this was remarkable. This is a new hope that God is going to make a new covenant of peace. Even though Jerusalem has been destroyed, this is a picture of a new Eden he's going to bring us back to.

But I think the main reason why Ezekiel 34 is here in the Bible is to help us recognize the true shepherd when he comes and to help us put our hope in him.

Because the exile in Babylon is a small picture of our world, that what seems to be irreparable personally and politically and permanently, all of these things can be dealt with by our good shepherd.

that there's a much greater hope than just a better political system. There's a much greater hope than just being returned to the land. It is to know Jesus Christ and be able to say the Lord is my shepherd and in that he's opened up a whole new world for every sheep of provision and protection of presence and pardon and the eternal assurance of being with him.

And I've thought about this this week. This has massive implications in all sorts of areas but I just briefly say, I think I can get to the heart of it in this one.

[25 : 00] What we need to learn how to do today and tomorrow morning is to connect our helplessness and our weakness to Christ.

That's what we need to do day by day. to place our hope and direct our expectations and our confidence to him because he's a very good shepherd.

And in the last book of the Bible we get a picture of heaven and there we are before the throne serving him night and day and the one who is in the throne shelters us in his presence.

This is what it says. They hunger no more. They thirst no more. The sun does not strike them nor any scorching heat for the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes so that he's not just our shepherd now and for this life but our shepherd forever.

So let's kneel shall we gather our hearts and pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.