

The Promise: A New Shepherd

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 December 2023

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] So this morning's reading is from Ezekiel 34, 1 to 24. The word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them, this is what the sovereign Lord says. Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves. Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed those who are ill or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd. And when they were scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill.

[1 : 03] They were scattered over the whole earth and no one searched or looked for them. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord. As surely as I live, declares the sovereign Lord.

Excuse me. Because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals. And because my shepherds did not search for my flock, but cared for themselves rather than for my flock.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord. This is what the sovereign Lord says. I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock.

I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths and it will no longer be food for them.

For this is what the sovereign Lord says. I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep.

[2 : 11] I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries. And I will bring them into their own land.

I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in good pasture and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land.

There they will lie down in good grazing land. And there they will feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the sovereign Lord.

I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. But the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

As for you, my flock, this is what the sovereign Lord says. I will judge between one sheep and another and between rams and goats. Is it not enough for you to feed them the good pasture?

[3 : 21] Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink the clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed them what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

Therefore, this is what the sovereign Lord says to them. See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away.

I will save my flock and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them.

He will tend them and be their shepherd. I, the Lord, will be their God. And my servant David will be prince among them. I, the Lord, have spoken.

Amen. Thanks very much, Derek, for reading.

[4 : 31] We're in Ezekiel 34. If we've not met before, I'm Martin Ayers. I'm the lead pastor here. It's great to see you. I hope that we can get to know you better at the end of the service.

But it would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at chapter 34 of Ezekiel. It's page 865 in the Church Bibles. And as always, you can find an outline inside the notice sheet that would help you as we look at that together.

Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray. Father God, thank you for the gift of your word and the opportunity to hear your voice.

We ask that by your spirit you will open your word to our hearts this morning and open our hearts to your word. For we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. I mentioned some weeks ago I'm reading this book Generations by Jean Twenge, this psychologist. Lots of people are reading it. It's very big books. I'm still reading it.

[5 : 30] And she goes through how each generation still alive today is different. Whether you're a boomer, that's like my parents' generation, Gen X, born in the kind of 70s, and then millennials, and then through to Gen Z, which she calls the iGen in terms of how technology has shaped people today.

And she describes with this very extensive research about the Western world, particularly America, but true of the Western world generally, that she sees a turning point in the research from 10 years ago, 2012, 11 years ago.

And one aspect of that is that happiness levels have been steadily rising for about 20 years and then turned and have started to fall since 2012.

And alongside that, on the other side of that, people have felt more isolated and loneliness has started to rise. Now, Jean Twenge, the psychologist, she gives technology as a key reason for those developments.

She talks about how because we've all got our own screens, we've never been more connected, but actually we've never been more isolated in terms of meaningful relationship. But then there are other reasons why people are feeling less happy.

[6 : 48] In my newspaper a couple of weeks ago, it talked about how research is saying convincingly that key to happiness and contentment in life is less that we'd have more materially in terms of comfort, and more that we'd have a sense that our lives are not out of control.

So if you have a sense that your life is not chaotic, that you are in control, or at least someone you can rely on is in control, it allows you to be content and stable and happy.

So no wonder people feel less happy today because we look around the news and we see geopolitical turmoil, there's war, there's anxiety about that. If we think about the economy, people are worried about the cost of living.

Unlike the boomers, the boomer generation growing up in the 60s and 70s had a deep confidence that they would be more affluent than their parents' generation, whereas today people don't feel that anymore.

There is uncertainty and anxiety. So a key question we could ask ourselves is, where do you turn in life when you feel isolated, when you feel anxious about the future, when you feel you lack a sense of purpose, where do you turn?

[8 : 04] Well, for Ezekiel's generation, everything that could go wrong has gone wrong. For 24 chapters of the book, as we've been in this sermon series, it's been a time to mourn Ezekiel's time.

He was called to be a prophet in 591 BC, bringing a message from God to his people, and the message was one that because they'd rejected God, judgment was coming.

These were the people that God had rescued out of slavery in Egypt, brought into the Promised Land. They'd been in the Promised Land under a great king, a time of their golden age was some four centuries before, but over time they had rejected God and now they were against him, so he's against them and judgment is coming.

And the culmination of that message from Ezekiel we heard last week, if you just glance down across the page at chapter 33, verse 21, he says this, In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, The city has fallen.

It's the worst possible news. Ezekiel's predictions have come true, and this refugee flees and arrives, bringing to the exiles in Babylon, horrific news, Jerusalem has gone.

[9 : 28] That means the people have lost their homes, they've lost their land, but more than that, they've lost the temple. They've lost the presence of God with them. The whole purpose that God rescued them for, that God would be with them, is gone.

Where do you turn when everything that could go wrong has gone wrong? And it seems there's no hope. So now God brings a new message in Ezekiel 34, and the first thing we hear about is that God pins the blame for his people's devastating plight on useless shepherds.

That's our first point, the problem of useless shepherds. And the reason they're so useless is in verse 2. This is what the sovereign Lord says, So who is he describing here?

Specifically, it's the kings of God's people in succession. Israel's king was meant to be their shepherd under God, and he would lead them to trust God and be faithful to God.

And they've had a disastrous run of kings. One of them, a few kings back, Manasseh, even brought a pagan Paul, an Asherah Paul, into the temple in Jerusalem, God's house, so that the people could worship a pagan god in the temple.

[10 : 54] The last two kings in the line of great King David, Jehoiakim and his uncle Zedekiah, have now gone into exile in Babylon. The last thing that King Zedekiah sees are his two sons being killed in front of him by Babylon.

So we get this imagery all through the chapter of the people of God as sheep, and the kings of God's people, they were meant to be the shepherds for God's sheep.

What kind of shepherds have they been? Well, in verse 3, they were self-seeking shepherds. You eat the curds. That's a perk of being a shepherd, you get the curds. But he says, You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool, and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.

So they got what they wanted from the sheep. They got the wool, they got the roast lamb. But in verse 4, In other words, it's their fault that the sheep are scattered.

In verse 5, They're scattered because there's no shepherd. The wild animals fed on them. That's a depiction of the enemy nations around them, plundering them.

[12 : 15] And they're in lonely exile. In verse 6, he says, My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

There's no king calling them back to God and calling them together. And what we're seeing is that God is deeply concerned about this. And let's just pause to reflect on how good it is that the God of all this is like this.

That when God gives people authority, he expects them to care for people with that authority. He will hold them to account for using the authority he gives them for other people's good.

That's good news, isn't it? Because it's not hard to find leaders around us today who are in it for themselves. That's why we have an authority problem, don't we, today?

We are very suspicious of people with authority. It didn't used to be like that. But often it's the case, isn't it, that it's because we've seen people with power over others, and they've misused it over the people they're meant to care for.

[13 : 31] And tragically, we can even see it in churches. And some of us here this morning have experienced that, we have experienced the misuse of authority and power personally in your own lives.

Well, in Ezekiel's time, the message was, the Lord sees exactly what's going on. And his verdict is in verse 10, over the page.

Verse 10, this is what the sovereign Lord says, I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves.

And then this picture of the failure of Israel's spiritual leaders, the kings, above all, what is the danger that they were meant to guard the people from? It's the wrath of God, the righteous judgment of a good and holy God.

God had promised that his just holy wrath, his judgment will fall on the people who reject him. And their leaders, their spiritual leaders, were meant to guide them in faithfulness.

[14 : 46] So when they fail, that is where they end up, under God's judgment. So what will the Lord do about it? That's our second point this morning, the provision of an awesome shepherd.

The big idea comes in verse 11. For this is what the sovereign Lord says, I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

One writer says that the whole rest of the chapter is like a footnote to verse 11. And I think you could even say the whole rest of the book of Ezekiel is like a footnote to this verse.

But once God says, I myself will step in and do this, everything else that we'll see in the comfort of the coming chapters flows. God's solution to useless shepherds is not I'm done with sheep farming, I'm going to leave the sheep scattered on the mountains to perish.

And it's not, I'm going to find some other people to appoint as shepherds because he's seen that they're useless. He won't do that again.

[15:52] His solution is, he will come and be the shepherd. And he will be the exact kind of inversion of the useless shepherds.

So in verse 11, he searches for the lost sheep. In verse 12, he rescues them. In verse 13, I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries and I will bring them into their own land.

So a new exodus is being promised. Back into the promised land. Verse 14, I will tend them in a good pasture. He says they will graze on the mountain heights and they will feed in rich pasture. Everything that a sheep needs and longs for. And look at the personal care of verse 15. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the sovereign Lord.

I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. This is the same God that Ezekiel met in chapter one.

[16:56] A few weeks ago, we looked at that. Great in power, great in glory. This man on fire on a throne above an awesome vault, above four cherubim, these warriors coming on a storm cloud from the north, terrifying in his might.

And now we see him relating to his people, binding himself to them, binding up the injured, protecting the weak. I don't know what you think about the Bible describing us as sheep.

Graham Cameron in our church family was here at the 9.30. His family run a sheep farm out to the southwest of Glasgow. So my family once went to spend a day with Graham.

He said that we were there to help. I'm not sure how much help we were. But it was a brilliant experience being on the sheep farm. It wasn't a sentimental experience. Sheep are difficult to manage.

It was quite tiring. They are stupid. They get lost. Just the other week, he was telling me, they gathered them in for the winter and they count them up and some of them were missing.

[18:06] So then they have to go back out onto the hills, finding the lost sheep. And when the shepherd goes after a sheep to help them because they are lost, they run away because they are hopeless at understanding what would be safe and what would be dangerous.

Sometimes the only way for a shepherd to rescue a sheep is to seize it, hurl it to the ground, bind its legs and throw it over his shoulders to carry it home.

But that's what a good shepherd does if he needs to or she needs to. They go out to look after lost sheep. They gather them. They lead them. And then they protect them.

They provide for them. And in the ancient world, a key difference to Graham's family today, in the ancient world, they would live with them. They'd be out with them roaming from one place to the next, finding pasture, sleeping with them and day and night traveling with them.

So when the Lord here promises that he will be the shepherd for his people, it means that his people are going to be gathered back to him and they're going to be healed and strengthened and led to good land where they'll be safe from danger, safe from enemies without, from wild animals.

[19:28] And they'll also be rescued from danger within, from within the flock, from the strong bullying the weak. If you look at verse 20, therefore this is what the sovereign Lord says to them, see I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

You'd have thought it'd be quite good to be a fat sheep, but you see what they're doing wrong here. It says, because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you've driven them away, I will save my flock and they will no longer be plundered.

I will judge between one sheep and another. So this shepherd, he values every sheep enormously. He is deeply concerned, angry even, when he sees the strong using their strength in a self-serving way instead of to look after the weak and the needy.

He expects the rich, the powerful among his people to provide for the weak, not to bully them, to serve them. So how is the Lord going to do this?

Well that's our third point, the mystery of a royal shepherd. There's a new development in verse 23, if we just look there. He says, I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them.

[20 : 53] He will tend them and be their shepherd. Well David had been king some 400 years earlier. Up until verse 23, we've been picturing a shepherd who is the Lord himself coming among his people to be their shepherd.

Now we're picturing a shepherd appointed by God, placed over his people and identified with this great former king David.

A great king. So when is this fulfilled? Well Ezekiel's first hearers are in exile and they hear prophecies that 70 years after the exile they'll be able to go back to Jerusalem and the region of Judea around them.

And that happens in fulfillment of prophecy but there's no way that you could describe that period of Israel's history when they returned to Jerusalem as under the terms of this chapter here.

It wasn't green pasture and good land. It wasn't safe from enemies. They were left there waiting for the fulfillment of this. And great to be looking at this today when this evening at our carol service we'll have the Bible reading from Luke chapter 2 where the message of the angels to the real shepherds outside the town of David, Bethlehem announced to them that the baby that's been born to Mary is the Savior who is Christ the Lord.

[22 : 27] He's the Christ. He's the promised king in David's line. Come to be the shepherd of God's people and he is the Lord. God himself come to shepherd his people.

He's appointed by God so that at his baptism they hear the voice from heaven saying this is my son whom I love. With him I'm well pleased. And then in Matthew chapter 9 he tells us that when Jesus saw the crowds he was filled with compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd and he began to teach them.

when the religious leaders start to grumble self-righteously at the kind of people Jesus welcomes to come back to God through him he tells the story of a shepherd with a hundred sheep and he has 99 of them and has lost one and he goes out to search.

He leaves the 99 behind for the one lost sheep and rejoices when he finds it. And then in John chapter 10 verse 11 he says this I am the good shepherd the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

He promises to gather in the lost sheep in verse 16 he says I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen I must bring them also they too will listen to my voice and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

[23 : 47] He leads and guides his sheep in verse 27 my sheep listen to my voice I know them and they follow me and he protects the sheep. He says in verse 28 I give them eternal life and they shall never perish no one will snatch them out of my hand.

And back here in Ezekiel 34 isn't it extraordinary how only in the coming of Jesus could God have fulfilled both sides of verse 24 if you just have a look he says I the Lord will be their God and my servant David will be prince among them I the Lord have spoken.

So Jesus comes and he is Lord over us the living God ruling us and he is prince among us he says to his disciples I am among you as one who serves as he goes to the cross to die in our place to protect the sheep by laying down his own life.

So he leads us with authority so that when we obey him we find fullness of life and he is among us to serve us and thanks to this shepherd God showers blessing on his people that's our fourth point the blessing of the good shepherd from verse 25 just have a look at what God promises now that his people have this good shepherd he promises peace or shalom in verse 25 I will make a covenant of peace with them shalom is wholeness it's everything that we were made for and our hearts long for he promises safety through the shepherd in verse 25 that he will rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live even in the wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety so even the places that they would have thought of before as dangerous will now be safe and in the Middle East they don't take rain for granted so verse 26 is a promise of abundance

I will make them and the places surrounding my hill a blessing I will send down showers in season there will be showers of blessing we've had safety prosperity then security in verse 27 the trees will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops the people will be secure in their land and because

they are safe and prosperous and secure they also have freedom verse 28 they will know that I am the Lord when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them so verse 28 freedom from fear he says no one will make them afraid so then we've had a familiar phrase all through the book we called our sermon series then they will know that I am the Lord and again and again as God says in Ezekiel that he will act he says then they will know that I am the Lord he says it of the nations as he will judge them but here there's a development in verse 30 on that phrase that promise verse 30 then they will know that I the Lord their God am with them and that they the Israelites are my people declares the sovereign Lord not just knowing that he is the Lord but knowing him in relationship as their God and God expresses their personal love his personal love for his people at the end of the chapter verse 31 you are my sheep the sheep of my pasture and I am your God declares the sovereign Lord and we're waiting today for the good shepherd the Lord Jesus to come again as he's promised and fulfill these promises the Bible closes with John's revelation of the new creation where these are fulfilled

[27 : 44] God's people will be secure in the new creation they'll be safe they'll prosper in the garden city and God will be at the heart of it with his people but always in the Christian life the future breaks into the present now that Jesus has come so that today every Christian can say the Lord is my shepherd therefore I lack nothing I lack no good thing today Jesus is finding the scattered and drawing them to himself today if we have been injured we can come to him and he will bind us up today we're being protected all the time guarded spiritually I was struck thinking about a shepherd with his sheep that often they will guard the sheep from danger from wild animals without the sheep even being aware of where the danger is and the very fact that we're here today at church is a testimony to spiritual protection from Jesus yesterday this week that's just gone by beyond what we're even aware of and when we stay close to Jesus when we trust him and by prayer we consciously bring our lives to him and involve him in our lives day by day we'll find that

God's goodness and love follow us all the days of our life so that whether we feel that we're in the valley of the shadow of death and God is there with us as a comforter or he's leading us to green pasture we can be confident of his care as our shepherd we all need a shepherd in life and we can be sure that this shepherd can be trusted he earned the right when he saw that the only way he could keep us safe was by him dealing with the right judgment of God against our sin and so he gave his life for ours at the cross so what do we do with Ezekiel chapter 34 well first let's hear the invitation to come to the good shepherd do you want to be safe do you want to be secure trust in the promises of the good shepherd do you want to have hope for the future and a guide for life day by day today not just one who is far away offering instruction but one who is right in amongst us Jesus says come to me and if you've not done that before you could do that today you could ask Jesus to be your good shepherd today will be a great day to do that most of us here have done that but could we this morning come to him with every area of our lives afresh sheep don't have areas of life that they keep from the shepherd they just have to surrender their whole life to him surrender their will to the will of the shepherd and trust him let's not be like a sheep who sees the shepherd coming and confuses his power and authority for danger let's come to him secondly let's reflect the good shepherd in how we treat each other we've heard that he condemns the strong sheep who overpower the weak instead of looking after them and each of us can take opportunities to care for the weak or the injured among us the vulnerable the lonely each of us can look out for the sheep we feel might be drifting away from Jesus the shepherd and encourage sheep who are wandering to come back

God was so concerned for his scattered sheep and his weak sheep that he came himself and now we have him as our shepherd let's make it our ambition to treat each other in a way that will please him and thirdly let's rejoice in our good shepherd the faithful gracious wise God who has come to shepherd us we're going to do that with the songs that we're going to sing in the rest of our time together and I've put a prayer on the sheets as well just on the inside in response to God's word so we'll just have a moment of quiet a chance to reflect on what God has been saying to us through Ezekiel 34 and then I will say that prayer as an opportunity for each of us to pray it in our own hearts and minds you are my sheep the sheep of my pasture and I am your God declares the sovereign Lord mighty God and gracious Lord we pray that you will write your word into our minds that we would know it may our thoughts and judgments be shaped by it we know we need a good shepherd thank you for the confidence we can have thanks to the fulfillment of these great promises in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ these promises would have seemed so distant to the first

hearers for whom everything that could have gone wrong had gone wrong and yet they were promises you were committed to in the coming of Jesus who is our Emmanuel Lord over us God among us we ask that you will write your word into our hearts that we may rejoice in it may we love these words from you to us and cherish them through them awaken in us a deeper experience of your love thank you for a savior who seeks us out when we stray from him and binds us up who promises that no one can snatch us from his hand thank you for the foretaste of our future with him in the gift of your spirit dwelling with us now assuring us this very day of your presence with us our security our safety with you your guidance in our lives and our confidence of a bright future of shalom with you we ask that you will write your word into our wills that we may obey it move us we pray to respond in obedient trust of our good shepherd putting his words into practice following his commands in every area of life and especially we pray this morning may you move us to care for others as he cares for us when it seemed all hope was lost you revealed your sovereign plan that you yourself would be the shepherd only you can bring us to a future day of safety and security where your blessings shower on your people like rain you call us as your sheep and we marvel that we can call you our God you are the [35 : 14] God of peace you brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep may you equip us with everything good for doing your will and work in us what is pleasing to you for Jesus name's sake Amen