

Ezekiel 34
Psalm 23
John 10

“The Shepherds and the Shepherd”

January 9, 2011

In Ezekiel 34-37 we will hear that God promises to restore the Davidic king (ch 34),
bring his people back into the land (ch 35),
and take away their disgrace (ch 36),
and even raise them up from the dead (ch 37).

As Christopher Wright puts it,

“There were political economic, agricultural, social, judicial, religious,
personal, relational and spiritual dimensions to their sin and their suffering.
And God intended to tackle every aspect of that need.
Such is the breadth and depth of the biblical gospel.
Indeed, the structure and content of the chapters we are about to study
would make a profitable case-study
as a paradigm of community transformation at every level.
For they describe what God aimed to achieve for a shattered people:
he would give them place (their land);
political protection;
dignity and self-respect again;
economic viability;
just and competent leadership;
religious and spiritual renewal;
and practical unity.

In short, they would come back from the grave.” (273-274)

And this starts in Ezekiel 34 with God’s word against the shepherds.

Throughout the ancient world, kings often referred to themselves as shepherds.
The great Babylonian king Hammurabi (from roughly the time of Abraham)
had referred to himself as the shepherd called by the gods.

An old Babylonian proverb said

“a people without a king (is like) sheep without a shepherd” (Block, 281).

In Numbers 27:17 Moses had prayed that God would appoint a successor for him
so that Israel would not be “like sheep without a shepherd.”

And especially from the time of David,
the kings of Israel are often referred to as shepherds.

But Ezekiel 34 insists that above all earthly shepherds

God himself is the Shepherd of Israel. (and we sing of this in Psalm 23)

Sing Psalm 23

Read John 10:1-18

You can easily see how Ezekiel 34 is behind Jesus' words in John 10.
But what is behind Ezekiel 34?

In Ezekiel 34, the prophet is reflecting on the words of Jeremiah 23:1-6.
The wording of Ezekiel 34 is often taken verbatim from Jeremiah 23.
We should almost think of Ezekiel 34 as a commentary – or sermon –
on Jeremiah 23.

Jeremiah had said:

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!”
declares the LORD.

Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel,
concerning the shepherds who care for my people:

“You have scattered my flock and have driven them away,
and you have not attended to them.

Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD.

Then I will gather the remnant of my flock
out of all the countries where I have driven them,
and I will bring them back to their fold,
and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

I will set shepherds over them who will care for them,
and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing,
declares the LORD.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD,
when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,
and he shall reign as king and deal wisely,
and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.
In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely.
And this is the name by which he will be called:

‘The LORD is our righteousness.’” (Jeremiah 23:1-6)

The three parts of Ezekiel 34 are all found here.

- 1) the woe to the shepherds
- 2) the promise to deliver the flock from the nations
- 3) and the promise to give his people peace and security through the restoration of David

But Ezekiel provides a bit more color and flavor.

He wants us to see the depths of our sin and misery,
so that we might acknowledge his grace and mercy all the more!

1. Woe to the Shepherds of Israel (v1-10)

a. The Indictment: the Shepherds Are Feeding Themselves (1-6)

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴

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 have ruled them. ⁵ *So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts.* ⁶ *My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.*

And he starts by describing how the shepherds have been “fleecing” the sheep.

The shepherds are the kings of Judah – the sons of David –
who have failed to be good shepherds,
but have ruthlessly exploited the sheep.

The word for “ruling harshly” here is only used elsewhere in the OT
to describe how Pharaoh mistreated the Israelites in Egypt, (Ex 1)
and to prohibit Israelites from mistreating each other (Lev 25:43, 46)

The sons of David have become as bad as Pharaoh.

A shepherd is supposed to lead the sheep –
A shepherd is supposed to feed the sheep –
A shepherd is supposed to defend the sheep from their enemies.

But Ezekiel says that the Davidic kings have not done this.

They have been stuffing their own faces –
and stuffing their own faces with *mutton* and *lamb chops*.
They have slaughtered the sheep, ignored the sheep,
and left the sheep to wander and stray.

And when the sheep stray and scatter,
they become food for the wild beasts.

When the shepherds fail in their care –
the sheep are devoured by wolves.

But it’s not just “*the*” sheep.

Eight times in verses 6-10 God refers to “*my sheep*.”

The kings of Judah have forgotten that they were called to shepherd *my sheep*.
They were stewards – vicegerents – whom God had called to care for *his flock*.

b. The Judgment: Therefore I Am Against the Shepherds (7-10)

⁷“*Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:* ⁸ *As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep,* ⁹ *therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:* ¹⁰ *Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall*

the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

And so God says, “I am against the shepherds” (v10).

God had promised to David that his son would sit on God’s throne forever.

But now God says that he is against the sons of David!

Tonight we’ll look at how this can be (from Psalm 89) –

since God had told David that if his sons strayed from his ways,
then he would discipline them.

We saw last week that the prophet is a watchman who must warn the people.

And if the watchman fails to sound the warning –

God will require him to account for their blood.

Now we hear that the shepherds – the kings – must give an account for the sheep.

Because the shepherds have become no better than wolves –

and so God says “I will rescue my sheep from their mouths.”

And verses 11-22 explain how:

2. I Will Rescue My Sheep (11-22)

Verses 11-22 form the second part of our text today.

These verses are oriented around the theme of how God will rescue his sheep (v12 and v22).

And Yahweh begins by saying, “Behold, I” –

Or perhaps, “Look! I am here!”

a. The Good Shepherd Protects and Feeds His Sheep (11-16)

¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹²As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

Notice what the good shepherd does:

“I will search for my sheep” (v11)

“I will rescue them” (v12)

“I will bring them into their own land” (v13)

“I will feed them with good pasture” (v14)

Verse 16 is especially important.

Remember God’s indictment against the shepherds in verses 4-5?

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

Well, here in verse 16 Yahweh uses precisely these terms in almost exactly reverse order!

I will seek the lost

I will bring back the strayed

I will bind up the injured

I will strengthen the sick [blending together the first two from verse 4]

By using the reverse order God says that he will reverse what the wicked shepherds have done.
in short: “I will feed them in justice.”

Finally, we have a clear, unambiguous statement of the coming restoration of Israel!
But the coming restoration will happen through God’s initiative as the good shepherd.

Repeatedly God says *I will* do this – *I myself* will be the shepherd of my sheep.
The shepherds of Israel have failed.
And so only God can save.

So when Jesus said, “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10),
when Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd” who leaves the 99 to go in search of the one,
he was claiming to do what the God of Israel had said that only God could do!

We have just celebrated the incarnation of our Lord.
We have just celebrated how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.
And here in Ezekiel 34 we see yet again why it was necessary.

Because only God can save!

b. The Good Shepherd Judges between Sheep and Sheep (17-22)

¹⁷"As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. ¹⁸Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? ¹⁹And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

In verses 17-22 God turns to the sheep.

It is true that the shepherds have failed.

But that does not excuse the sheep!

Just because someone else – even someone in authority – has sinned against you does not mean that you get to sin against others!

Certainly God holds the watchman accountable for his failure to warn the city.
Certainly God holds the shepherds accountable for their fleecing of the sheep.

But as we saw last time, God also holds the people accountable for their own sins!
And here in verses 17-22 we hear that God holds the sheep accountable for how they treat one another!

And the picture that Ezekiel uses is of a big strong ram
drinking the clean water – but then muddying it up for the others.

Sheep do not like muddy water – neither do they drink from fast flowing streams –
so if the pools are muddied, then they won't drink much.
Likewise, if the big sheep trample the pasture,
then the little sheep won't get much to eat.

When I have preached at ordinations I often use this passage to talk about the church.
And we'll get there.
But there is one stop we need to make first:
because Ezekiel is talking about economics.

Ezekiel is talking about *food* and *resources*.

The big sheep – the wealthy and powerful people –
are preventing the little sheep – the poor and weak –
from obtaining access to the basic necessities of life.

Ezekiel's point here is economic:
how does your usage of the basic things of life (food, shelter, clothing)
affect the weak?
God says that he will judge the sheep based on how they treat each other.

As he says in verses 20-22:

²⁰"Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, ²²I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep.

In closing this passage God again says, "Behold, I" – "Look, here I am!"
But whereas at the beginning of the passage,
God was coming to rescue the sheep from the wicked shepherds,
now God is coming in judgment against the big ugly sheep
who is bullying the little sheep.

Not only the shepherds of Israel (the Davidic kings),
but also the powerful rams of Israel (the leaders)
have oppressed and scattered the weak and lean sheep.

Verses 17-19 made it sound like it was mostly a matter of passive indifference.
Muddying the water and trampling the pasture.

Verses 20-22 shows us the more active and brutal side:
“you push with the side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns”

If you are pushing other people out of the way in order to advance in your company –
if you are making other people look bad so that you look good –
then you are doing the sort of thing that God condemns.

This can happen in the church when people become preoccupied
with themselves and their own agendas.

Have you ever visited a church,
and everyone was so interested in their own conversations that they never talked to you?
If we just cluster with “people like us,”
the result is that the “lean” – the “weak” – are passively ignored.

But there are “active” ways of harming people as well!
I have known people who were theologically astute,
but they used their theological precision as a weapon.
Or others who were so full of themselves that they dominated SS classes,
because they thought that their experience – or their perspective
was the most important thing for others to hear!

If you can hurt people by ignoring them –
and you can hurt people by pushing yourself on them –
then what do you do?!

Love them!

When God judges the sheep for how they have treated each other,
he will judge between sheep and sheep.
How are you helping your fellow sheep gain access to good food and good water?
It’s why Jesus will speak of the separating of the sheep and the goats in the final day.
And how they are separated in Matthew 25
is all about how they treated “the least of these my brothers.”
Did you clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the sick and imprisoned?

Because this is what Jesus has come to do.
He has come seek the lost,
to bring back the strayed,
to bind up the injured,

to strengthen the weak,
and to destroy the fat and strong!

Because Jesus has come to restore peace to his flock (verses 23-31).

3. I Will Restore Peace to My Flock (23-31)

a. I Will Restore David as Shepherd (23-24)

²³And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

We have seen repeatedly in Ezekiel an emphasis on God's sovereignty in salvation.

You will notice here that *God* is the good shepherd.

God is the one who will restore and rescue his people.

And when God accomplishes his purpose in salvation,
he will re-establish the Davidic king.

But David's role is secondary.

David's sons have repeatedly and continually failed.

David cannot save you.

Only God can save.

But *when* God saves, he will also restore the throne of David.

In other words, Ezekiel is saying that God is not going to save his people
by restoring the Davidic throne;
rather, God will restore the David throne
when he saves his people!

And think about this:

when does God restore the Davidic throne?

(think about the question the disciples ask in Acts 1 –

“are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

The disciples understand that the restoration of the kingdom is the next step!

And Peter, in his sermon at Pentecost,

declares that Jesus has been seated on the throne of David.)

The *ascension* of Jesus is his *accession* to the throne of David.

Verses 25-29 then go on to describe the covenant of peace that God will establish for them:

b. I Will Make a Covenant of Peace (25-29)

²⁵ "I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. ²⁶And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. ²⁷ And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land. And they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslaved them.

²⁸ *They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them. They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid.* ²⁹ *And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations.*

The idea of the covenant of peace is rooted in Isaiah 54:7-10 which speaks of how God will no longer be angry, but have compassion on his people, “My steadfast love for you will never be shaken; Nor will the covenant of my peace be moved.” (Is 54:10)

Back when we were looking at Jerusalem’s failure to keep the covenant, we saw that Ezekiel drew on Leviticus 26 to speak of the covenant curses. Here in verses 25-29 he draws on the covenant blessings of Leviticus 26 as well. God had said that if Israel obeyed his statutes and observed his commands, “then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.” (Lev 26:4) “you shall dwell in your land securely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will remove harmful beasts from the land...” (Lev 26:6)

The covenant of peace is the fulfillment of the covenant promises.

Notice the parallels!

God says that he will:

Banish wild beasts – sleep in the woods (sheep)

Showers of blessing

Trees yield fruit and earth yield increase

(think of Paul’s “gospel increase”)

break bars of yoke

you will no more be prey to the nations, nor beasts of the land

give you renowned plantations (no more hunger)

so that you may no longer suffer the reproach of the nations

God will reorder creation.

Man’s alienation from creation will be ended.

You may sleep peacefully in the woods without fear of wild beasts.

Economic life will be properly ordered.

There will be no hunger.

And human relationships will be properly ordered –

you will no longer suffer the reproach of the nations!

Ezekiel’s description of the covenant of peace

is the vision of the eschatological reordering of all creation.

In verse 27, Ezekiel uses the image of the “trees of the field”
yielding fruit and the earth yielding its increase.
Ezekiel will come back to this image in chapters 40-48 in the vision of the new temple.

God had put Adam and Eve in the garden temple of Eden
and told them to be fruitful and multiply.

Israel has failed precisely where Adam and Eve failed.
But now Jesus has done what only God could do – in saving his people.
And yet Jesus has also done what only man could do – in bearing our guilt.

As Paul says in Romans 5:1,
“Since we have been justified by faith
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And so now, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing.
The gospel is increasing and multiplying as Jesus continues his glorious work.

And so therefore, in the church, we should begin to see the proper ordering of relations –
because king Jesus has been seated at the right hand of the Father,
the firstfruits of the kingdom has already been established
with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.
But we do not yet see everything under his feet –
we do not yet see everything properly restored.

We see the beginnings of that eschatological peace in the church.
But it is still only “in part.”

And when all this happens:

c. And They Shall Know that I Am the LORD (30-31)
³⁰*And they shall know that I am the LORD their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord GOD.* ³¹*And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord GOD.*”

We’re back to Ezekiel’s favorite phrase:

“And they shall know that I am the LORD.”
But this time we get more!
“and that they, the house of Israel, are my people....
And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God.”

This is what Leviticus 26:12-13 had said:

“I will be your God; and you will be my people.
I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to end your slavery.
I broke the bars of your yoke, and I made you walk erect.”

In the modern world we have replaced the shepherd with the rancher.
And in the church, that model is often followed as well.

As Iain Duguid points out,

“As we have moved from being pastors to ranchers,
we have traded in the vocation of handcrafting saints
for the business of mass-producing sheep.” (399)

Shepherds have to do the hard work of taking care of sheep –
binding up the weak.

“Taking care of the weak sheep is hard, painful, time-consuming work,
and we have been told that there are more important things to do with our time.
As a result, we gradually turn into managers of the flock,
and as long as the flock is growing in numbers, no one around us complains.”
(399)

But God says that he is against such “shepherds.”

1 Peter 5 describes what shepherding looks like,
as Peter exhorts the elders,

“as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ,
as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:
shepherd the flock of God that is among you,
exercising oversight,
not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;
not for shameful gain, but eagerly;
not domineering over those in your charge,
but being examples to the flock.

And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

Peter echoes the warning of Ezekiel 34.

Don't be like the Davidic kings of old.

Be like the Son of David – the chief Shepherd –

the one who humbled himself and gave up his life for us!