

God is Our Shepherd
Ezekiel 34

Turn to Ezekiel 34. In John 10, Jesus called himself the good shepherd, and he compared himself there to hired helpers who did not care about the sheep, who ran away if there was danger or trouble around. Jesus said he was not like that, he was a good shepherd who took the best possible care of the sheep, no matter what it cost him. Jesus knew Ezekiel 34, and built on it.

Ezekiel, for his part, sounds like he's read Ps 23, the Lord is our shepherd. In some places in this chapter, it sounds like Ezekiel is preaching a sermon on Ps 23.

Before and After in Ezekiel's Prophesying

Ezekiel dates everything in his book by the exile of king Jehoiachin. In Ezk 1:2 he said he had his vision of God in the fifth year of the exile of king Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin and Ezekiel and perhaps 10,000 other Jews were taken to Babylon after the 2nd Babylonian invasion, 598 BC.

As soon as he was called, Ezekiel preached judgment and destruction. It is a hard and almost fierce book, but only until the end of Ezk 33. Ezek 33:21 says, *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!"* Ezekiel remembers the day. The city had fallen, the temple was destroyed.

Jerusalem's fall is when God's glory left. God's judgment and leaving had finally happened, as we talked about last week, from Ezekiel 8-11. Ezekiel had that vision in the sixth year, and now it was the twelfth year, and what God showed him in the sixth year happened in the twelfth year.

From that day on, Ezekiel's message changed completely. From Ezekiel 34 to 48, the end of the book of Ezekiel, everything is salvation and hope and promise and restoration. God has wonderful plans, and Ezekiel writes about them. Our Scripture for today, "God our shepherd" in ch 34, is the beginning of Ezekiel's hopeful messages about God saving and restoring Israel.

As I have been reading through Ezekiel the last couple of months, I have sometimes found it hard to believe that in the last 15 chapters of Ezekiel, it is still the same prophet, talking about the same God and the same Israel. The message is hard on Israel up to chapter 33, and so positive and encouraging after that. But that is how Ezekiel reads.

Our text is the whole of Ezekiel 34, which I have divided into seven parts.

1, Israel's Shepherds Only Care for Themselves – 34:1-6

Ezekiel 34:1 *The word of the Lord came to me:* ² *"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? ³ You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak, or healed the sick, or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays, or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. ⁵ So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶ 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.

Who is God talking about? Who are the shepherds? Ezekiel was in Babylon, the shepherds of Israel were mostly in Jerusalem. Jeremiah was in Jerusalem this whole time, and Jeremiah speaks often against the priests and prophets. Jeremiah was himself a priest and a prophet, as Ezekiel.

But Jeremiah says the prophets prophesy lies, and the priests rule by their own authority, prophets and priests alike practice deceit (Jer 5:31; 6:13). In other places Jeremiah includes kings and officials. Priests, prophets, kings, and officials, all corrupt. It did not always bother the people, but it sure bothered God.

For those of us in places of leadership, this tells us what God is looking for, doesn't it. It was fine that shepherds used the milk of the sheep, and the wool, and that they slaughtered one for meat once in a while. It was fine for shepherds to live off the flock as long as they tended the flock. But these shepherds did not tend the flock or care for it, instead they ruled harshly and brutally.

The wandering over all the mountains, and on every high hill, is spiritual wandering, idolatry. In Canaan, people worshipped idols on the high places. The shepherds did not guide the people toward God.

2, God is Against His Shepherds and For His Flock – 34:7-10

34:7 Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: ⁸ As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, 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, ⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: ¹⁰This 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.

This is my flock, and you are my shepherds, says God. Now I must rescue my flock from my shepherds! Woe to the shepherds that live off the flock but do not care for it. I have felt the stern eyes of this Scripture on me this week. It warns me. Good shepherds and bad shepherds are separated, and God is paying attention to his shepherds and his flock. Ed, be careful.

God removes the careless shepherds entirely. He is against them, and he holds them accountable. He removes them, and rescues the flock from them.

3, God Himself will Shepherd His Flock – 34:11-16

If you want it done right, you have to do it yourself. Did you even hear anyone say that? That's what God thinks about shepherding his people.

34:11 *For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.* ¹² *As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.* ¹³ *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.* ¹⁴ *I will tend them in a 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 a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.* ¹⁵ *I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord.* ¹⁶ *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.*

Some of this sounds like Ps 23. “*I will tend them in good pasture, ... they will lie down in good grazing land, ... I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down.*” Ps 23 says, “*The Lord is my shepherd, he has me lie down in green pastures.*”

V13 says, *I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land.* We are talking here about bringing exiles home to Israel.

In v8 we read that because there is no proper shepherd, the flock has been plundered and has become food for the wild animals. God is talking about the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

They plundered the flock, they are the wild animals that ate the flock. If the shepherds had directed the people back to God, they would not have been plundered, or been food for wild animals. But God is going to bring them all back.

4, God Judges Between Sheep – 34:17-22

34:17 *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.* ¹⁸ *Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?* ¹⁹ *Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?* ²⁰ “*Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.*” ²¹ *Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns*

until you have driven them away, ²² I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another.

The problem is not that there are weak sheep and strong sheep. The problem is that strong sheep use their strength to take advantage of the weak. The strong take care only of themselves, which they can do, since they are strong. This is a warning to God's people who are strong enough to take advantage of the weak.

And this comforts the weak. God is paying attention, and a time is soon coming when that will not happen anymore. Good shepherds guard against that kind of behaviour in the flock. It will not happen in God's flock. God will not let his flock be plundered by wild animals, or by careless shepherds, or by strong sheep. None of those happen in God's flock.

5, The Christ will Tend the Flock – 34:23-24

34:23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.

“I the Lord have spoken.” That means there is no doubt about this, it will surely happen. Ezekiel speaks about the Messiah, but not very much. And Ezekiel prefers the word “prince” to the word “king.” God is the rightful King of Israel. The human king acts under God and so is a prince, not a king. In Ezekiel, the Messiah himself is usually a prince rather than a king.

The Messiah, “my servant David,” will be the ultimate shepherd. He will tend them, he will tend them and be their shepherd. “My servant David” is mentioned twice. The Messiah will be God's servant, and will be the best shepherd ever, over all the sheep.

In John 10, Jesus twice says, “I am the good shepherd.” And he says, “There will be one flock, one shepherd.” In John 10, Jesus is preaching Ezk 34 to those people.

And, my brothers and sisters, we have the remarkably good fortune to know this Shepherd, to follow him and trust him and be his disciples. We've been called by him, invited by him, rescued by him, gathered by him, and brought into the one flock.

6, God's Covenant Security in the Land – 34:25-29

34:25 I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live in the wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ The trees will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land. 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. ²⁸ They will no longer be plundered by

the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid. ²⁹ I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations.

In this paragraph, God sort of still uses sheep and shepherd language, but he also speaks of the people being secure in their land. This is like the best possible Promised Land.

7, Covenant Summary 34:30-31

Now in the last two verses we get to the bottom line. The real point is not the land or the good crops, it is God himself. 34:30 *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. ³¹ You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

We will KNOW that God is with us, and that we are his people. Now this is written for Israelites. But Gentiles are included in this, just listen:

*At that time you Gentiles were excluded from citizenship in Israel. You were foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope, and without God in the world. ¹³ But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ...
¹⁹Consequently, you Gentile believers are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household (and the one true flock). Eph 2:12-13, 19*

We were foreigners to the covenants and the promises, and without God, but not anymore! *Then they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them and that they all, believing Israelites and believing Gentiles, are my people, declares the Sovereign Lord. You all together are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

That's what it means to be included in the covenants and the promises, along with Israel. The best part of this is that the God of Israel, Maker of Heaven and Earth, has become our Shepherd. He said to himself, "if I want shepherding done right, I need to do it myself." And it did, and does. He is with us, brothers and sisters, the Lord our God is with us. And we are his sheep, the sheep of his pasture. Amen.

PRAYER: Father in heaven, you are the Almighty Shepherd. Help us to know that you are with us, and to know that we are your people. Help us to know that we are your sheep, the sheep of your pasture, and that you're our God. Thank you that this is just as true on the days we doubt it as on the days we know it. Thank you that not only is this true us, but this is single most important truth about us. The one thing that shapes our lives more than anything, now and forever, is that you are our Shepherd, and you're with us, and we are your people, the sheep of your pasture, and you're our God. We are so fortunate! Amen

BENEDICTION: Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, may that God of peace equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.