

Advent 2024 | Long Foretold: The Shepherd, Ezekiel 34, 12/8/24

Ezekiel 34 V.2 *Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?*

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.

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.

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."* Pray

In 2021 Retired Green Beret Lt. Col. Scott Mann assembled a volunteer group of covert US veterans to help Afghan refugees flee the Taliban during the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This harrowing mission was called **Operation Pineapple Express**. A year later he wrote about the rescue of more than 1000 refugees. In the book he talks about the constant imminent danger, narrow escapes and their miraculous survival. What would cause these men and women to voluntarily put their lives on the line for people halfway across the world for this daring rescue mission? Lt. Col. Mann and his team would tell you it's because their lives and freedom mattered to them. Today we are going to see that God planned his own Cosmic Operation Pineapple Express, for humanity because in God's eyes, every man, woman and child deeply, and infinitely matters to God. His rescue mission was initiated that first Christmas in the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Last week we started our Advent series: **Long Foretold**, we are looking at four portraits of the Messiah born that first Christmas, told by the Prophets of Israel hundreds of years before He would come to be the Savior of the world. Each of these portraits give us a glimpse into what Jesus would be like, who we are and about our relationship with him. Last week we studied the portrait of Jesus as the Bridegroom of a wayward bride from Hosea, which displayed his intimate and unconditional love for His people. This week we will study the long foretold portrait of the Messiah as the **Shepherd** from Ezekiel 34.

This portrait of the shepherd and sheep is used all throughout the Bible to describe God and humanity, 400+ people are called sheep, 100 or so God is called shepherd. Obviously that means one of the main ways to understand who God is, who we are, and our relationship with God is by understanding this picture.

Ezekiel 34 contains the longest metaphor of sheep and shepherd in the Bible, excerpts which we just read. Outline for today: **The problem with Human Sheep, the problem with Human Shepherds, God's Rescue Mission**

The Problem with Human Sheep

When we think of sheep, most of us think of fluffy, cute, cuddly sheep in a pretty green meadow, or the few at the petting zoo. That's not quite the right picture of sheep in real life. If you spoke to a shepherd in herding societies like Morocco for example, they would tell you that sheep are helpless, foolish, often obstinate creatures. Sheep lose their way continually, even when they are close to the pen. They are hard to round them up unless you have sheep dogs to scare them. They will eat things that can kill them. If they trip and fall on their backs, they can't turn themselves over...legs flail like a beetle. They often get themselves into very dangerous situations, and when one strays and the shepherd finds it, he often must rush it, seize it, cast it down, bind it, carry it over your shoulder home.

And this is the same portrait of sheep in the Bible and what we see in Ezekiel 34, in v.12 we see sheep that have lost their way again. In v.14 they need to be led to green pasture because they are incapable of finding it themselves. In v.16 they constantly need to be tended to and mended because they are constantly getting themselves into danger and getting sick. Behold the common metaphor for human beings in the Bible. It's not the most flattering portrait is it? The Bible is honest about our strengths and weaknesses. We've probably all watched those talent shows on TV when they interview a contestant who says that everyone around them has told them how amazing their voice is and then they get up to sing and they are a trainwreck? And you are like, "Why didn't this person's parents tell her the truth and save her the embarrassment?" The Bible isn't like that. We may not want to hear it, but it tells the truth about us and the truth about us is that we are often just like these sheep.

Spiritually, in our souls and our sin tendencies we are like sheep. The Bible says, like sheep, we have all gone astray, turning to our own way. We are often hard-headed and don't listen to wise shepherds in our lives. We will spiritually consume things that aren't good for our souls. We hurt ourselves and each other easily. We often don't recognize the truth from error, and we can't find our way to green pastures, to heaven, on our own. Notice the metaphor isn't "Rancher and horses." Without a rancher- the horses go wild. But without a shepherd the sheep die¹. A sheep without a shepherd in the wild is called "a meal." Which means, if we are human sheep in some ways, it means we were made to have shepherds in our lives.

The Problem with Human Shepherds

¹ Thanks to Tim Keller- <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/the-shepherd-king/>

Before we look at the problem, let me frame it by saying that Bible has established three human institutions- **the Family (Genesis 2, Ephesians 4-5), the Church, (The Pastor Epistles), the State (Romans 13).** These institutions are authority structures that God has put into place that create strong foundations and healthy boundaries designed for our collective thriving. While many humans may be anti-authority, God certainly isn't. He expects that we submit to and align with those human authorities. The problem is that often there is a crisis of leadership in any one or all of those authorities. That doesn't mean that we abandon them altogether as many have attempted to do in our culture, to our own detriment. It means that as Christians, we work for reform, to do justice, hold our leaders accountable, and work to the ideal of a more perfect union- whether that is in the family, church, state.

With this framework in mind, we see the problem with human shepherds in v.1-10. In Ezekiel's day, in the 6th century, there was a crisis of leadership among the shepherds of Israel, both civically among the kings and magistrates, and spiritually among the priests. V.1-10 is an outline of bad leadership.

Look at their motivation **V.2 Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?** This is at the heart of failure of leadership: selfishness. Using the flock to fatten themselves, line their pockets, live in comfort or take power. A desire not to serve, but to be served.

This selfish motive led to two results: **Neglect- 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.** The flock didn't matter to the shepherds of Israel. **Abuse- v.4 You have ruled them harshly and brutally.**

What is the result? **Lost and Dying Sheep 5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals.** This is exactly what happened to the people of Israel- because of the crisis of bad shepherds, the people of Israel had been scattered into exile throughout the Babylonian empire. Many were slaughtered, enslaved, and separated from their families at the time that Ezekiel was writing. And by the time we get down to v.10 it begs an answer to the questions, "Who will do something about these bad shepherds?" and "Who will rescue the lost sheep?" And isn't this the question of every age when we see bad shepherding and leadership? When we see the lost, broken, hurting, around us and in our own lives?

God's Rescue Mission

God answers these questions in no uncertain terms. **v.10 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. God will judge! God says- "Woe to the shepherds."** That's a terrifying picture of the almighty God, the just God to be against them and hold them accountable. Friends, no one is getting away with anything. God is the avenger. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," declares the Lord. But also look, He says, **v.10 I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.**

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.* He goes on to say, he will feed them, lead them in green pastures, protect them, bind their wounds, and bring them home. **God Himself will be their Shepherd.** “I myself.” What an amazing statement.

Now check this out...in v.23, he says something that seems strange, or almost contradictory. **23** *I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.* Wait a second...first he says he’s going to do it himself, then he says he’s going to put David over them. But David’s long dead, right? So what does that mean? The answer is God would send Himself, in the human flesh of someone who is descended from David. This is exactly what he did in sending the Messiah, Jesus Christ that first Christmas. This is why the Gospel writer Luke traces the genealogy of Jesus to David, and in Luke 1:31-33 The angel Gabriel says to Mary, *“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.*

The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; His kingdom will never end.” And low and behold, who were the first recipients of the message of Jesus’ birth? “Lo, the shepherds watching their flocks by night.”

And what do we find Jesus saying about himself? One of his 7 great I AM statements in John, John 10:11 Jesus declares *“I am the good shepherd.”* A direct fulfillment of the Ezekiel 34 prophecy. What makes Jesus the True Shepherd for sheep like us? Let me give you just three reasons. **He Knows all his sheep!**

John 10:14 *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.* There’s a Scottish pastor named Douglas McMillan who was an actual shepherd. He said one day he was on a train with a shepherd-friend who 3 weeks prior had sold a number of his lambs to another farmer. As the train was pulling out of the station, they passed a flock of sheep in a pen near the track and the shepherd said, “Hey! There’s four of my lambs in there.” He knew his sheep so well he could spot 4 lambs out of a flock from a moving train. Honestly, I’m not even sure I could spot my kids from a moving train. Just kidding. But that’s how well a good Shepherd knows his sheep.

There’s an individuality to God’s love that the Holy Spirit enables you to FEEL. It’s not just “God so loved *the world...*” as in “God has a generic kindly disposition to THE WORLD,” but “God loves *ME.*”²

He pursues his lost sheep. Do you know human sheep matter this much to God? Even though we are helpless and foolish, even though we wander and stray. This is the story Jesus tells of himself in Luke 15. The story is that there was a shepherd that had 100 sheep and he would

² Story from JD Greear <https://summitchurch.com/GetFile.ashx?Guid=ea27767e-6223-4a9c-92c3-e688b740bd65>

count them periodically during the day to make sure they were all there. But then one day he went, 97, 98, 99, 99, 99. Where's Larry? Larry is gone again. What happened to Larry? And the Bible says, what does he do? Does he say, oh, well, I still got 99. 99 out of 100 is not bad. I don't have time to deal with that. Nope. This shepherd left the 99 with an undershepherd and went out looking for Larry. Why? Because he wasn't a random 1 out of 100, he was Larry, and Larry mattered to the shepherd. And the Bible says he searched far and wide until he found him. And when he found him, what did he do? Did he get mad at him? Did he scold him and beat him and punish him and say, you stupid sheep. "I missed my whole afternoon." No. He picked him up, and put him on his shoulders and carried him home, to great rejoicing! This is how God feels toward every one of us. In fact, we matter so much, it goes one step further. **He sacrifices himself for his sheep.**

John 10:11 The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep.

So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The shepherd became a sacrificial lamb for us. [Sacrifices himself slide]

The Bible says that sin is the wolf, the predator of our souls. Sin came into the world and fractured our relationship with God. It made us cold to God, alienated from God, separated from God. God lost mankind to sin and brought destruction upon our world and death to our souls. But God is not about to throw his hands up and go, "Oh, well, I still got the angels." No way. God decided he's going after man, every single man, every single woman, every single child. Jesus steps in the gap to kill the predator of our souls through his own sacrifice. Anything else we look to as the shepherd in our lives, whether it's a husband or wife, or trying to be good on our own, other religion, none of these can save you from the predator of sin except Jesus! Everyone of us matters so much to God that he laid down his own life on a rescue mission for us.

Two Challenges I want to put before you today from this message.

If you already have made Jesus your True Shepherd. **1- Trust your good shepherd in your weakness.** Our staff had a spiritual renewal day this week where we took a couple hours away from our desks and to-do lists and emails and meetings and we scattered around the building and around the area to be silent and seek the Lord. During my time, I was reflecting on Psalm 23 and this passage, what it means for me to be a "sheepy under-shepherd" and trust my true shepherd like David. And I just started journaling about how needy I am of him for everything just like a sheep. Filling up pages... "need you for wisdom, strength, patience, Lord I'm prone to wander- I need you for mercy and grace when I mess up. I need you to refill me when I feel empty." So here's an assignment- journal and fill in the blank... **Lord I need you because...**

If you haven't made Jesus your True Shepherd. **2- Trust your good shepherd to bring you home.** The only way the Afghani refugees were going to make it out alive is if they fully trusted Lt. Col Scott Mann and his team to shepherd them. The same is true with our good shepherd, Jesus. Take a look at this **famous painting in 1898** by Alfred Usher Soord, depicting Jesus, our Shepherd, risking his life to go after a lost lamb. Maybe life has gotten you into a place and you

don't even know quite how you got there. You are stuck on a rocky cliff through addiction. Or through deep depression or anxiety, or despair. Or you're in a bad relationship. Or you're just suffering under a series of choices you now regret. Or everything should be great in your life, but you feel an emptiness in the pit of your stomach. And this morning, maybe for the first time, you realize that your main problem is that you've been doing things your way instead of God's way. You're lost, and it's your sin--your insistence on going out your way--that has led you to this place. Well, I have good news: the Savior is reaching out for you. He knew you were missing, and he left the 99, he said, to go after the lost 1, which was you. That's you, and this is him reaching out for you this morning. That's that tug you feel in your heart right now. Will you allow him to reach you, put you on his shoulders and take you home? He wants to forgive your sins, restore you, and put you on a new path. But you have to surrender to him and let him have control. Are you willing to do that?

Pray

Kids musical