

Ezekiel 34:1-24

The word of the LORD came to me: “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? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. 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. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. 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.

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 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, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 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.

“For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As 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. And 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. I 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. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I 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.

“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is 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? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?”

“Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and 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.

Introduction

When we think of shepherds in the Bible, several images may come to mind. Perhaps King David’s beginnings before Samuel anointed him. Perhaps one of David’s most famous poems, Psalm 23. Perhaps the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew and Luke. Two of the biggest hits in recent Christian music have latched onto the idea of Jesus as our shepherd who never leaves the one behind. The shepherd image resonates with me as well; I have a picture of our stained-glass image of the Good Shepherd as the background on my phone. The shepherd is an image Christians are drawn toward even though most of us do not have firsthand knowledge of life as a real shepherd. Some time ago, I heard a story of a seminary graduate who lived in Israel for a year before accepting his first pastoral position. During that year, he lived with a shepherd, and day after day would see the way in which literal shepherds led their flocks. The shepherd and the seminarian would walk his 2,000 sheep to a large pasture near a river to feed on the grass. When they got there, there were four other shepherds along with their flocks of the same size.

At the end of the day, one by one the shepherds left. A shepherd would make a particular sound and begin to walk home, and about 2,000 sheep stopped eating and followed him. The next shepherd later did the same, and got the same result, until the final shepherd with this seminarian were all who were left. The shepherd made his call and the remaining sheep followed him. Not one sheep from the five flocks was left at that pasture by the river. The seminarian

claimed this happened every time they went to the open pastures to feed. At night, the shepherd would lead the sheep into the sheepfold and sleep for the night. The next morning, the shepherd would make his sound again and his sheep would follow their shepherd through the gate. The shepherd was a literal figure, but was also a metaphor of leadership in the Ancient Near Eastern world, and Ezekiel makes particular use of it throughout his book.

Tri-fold, God-Anointed Leadership Structure Conveyed throughout Ezekiel

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, we read of three types of leaders anointed by the LORD. The theological term for this tri-fold structure is *Munus Triplex*. The three roles of God-anointed leadership are the office of the prophet who maintained truth in the role of a prosecuting attorney, the office of the priest who maintained worship through the role of a minister, and the office of the king who maintained order through the role as a governor, prince, or ruler. All throughout this book, Ezekiel distinguishes between these three offices, and speaks against all three together under the one label of shepherd. In Ezekiel, the image of “shepherd” is an umbrella term for anyone in one of those three God-anointed offices of leadership over the LORD’s people.

Ezekiel says as much in 22:23-31, speaking to Nation Israel— *And the word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, say to her, You are a land that is not cleansed or rained upon in the day of indignation. The conspiracy of her prophets in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in her midst. Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned from among them. Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain. And her prophets have ... [seen] false visions and [divined] lies for them, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD God,’ when the LORD has not spoken...I sought a man from them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none.*

The prophets twisted the truth, thus failing to maintain truth. The priests conjoined the holy with the common, the clean with the unclean, thus failing to maintain proper worship. The kings corruptly stepped over top of people out of self-interest, and self-preservation, thus failing

to maintain order. Throughout Ezekiel, the prophet speaks against each of these three types of leaders separately as prophets, priests, and kings—and like in that last passage, Ezekiel, speaks against all three types of leaders collectively as the shepherds of Israel. The prophet continues to do this until our passage in Ezekiel 34.

In our passage, Ezekiel describes all the perversities of these leaders. Rather than feeding the flock, these bad shepherds fed themselves from the flock. They squeeze dry all the financial resources of their people, not to do the LORD’s work, but to instead line their own pockets. They overextend their flocks, overusing the strong to exhaustion, not for the sake of building up the weak, but simply so they can sit in their recliners and kick it at the peril of the weak.

An alumnus of the seminary I graduated from was removed from his ministry as a mega-church pastor several years ago. He was removed for abusing his power as the pastor. And when he left that church, all fifteen of their campuses became eleven independent churches. Did you catch that math? Fifteen to eleven instantly on a single weekend, and most of those eleven closed altogether within a matter of a couple of years. Only three remain a mere five years later, to my knowledge.¹ When the main shepherd of that church was no longer behaving as a shepherd ought to behave, the flocks scattered. At the most basic level, all sin can be defined as elevating our own will over God’s will. This former pastor and these bad shepherds in Ezekiel are no exception to that brief definition. Who will seek the sheep scattered by the leadership deviation of these bad shepherds?

Well after 33 chapters of buildup, with prophecies against the prophets, priests, and kings of Israel, Ezekiel prophesies something rather remarkable in the name of the LORD: *I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for [the bad shepherds]*. The shepherds the LORD anointed to lead his people utterly failed. So what does the LORD do? The LORD commits to starve those bad shepherds who fed themselves off the sheep, and he commits to rescue his people. This is good news that we can and ought to share, especially to those in our lives who are Catholic, in light of seemingly never-ending and heartbreaking revelations of sexual abuse involving children.² Despite the utter destruction caused by men in God-anointed roles of leadership, there is good news we can share: the LORD will rescue his people.

¹ Though I made no mention of the name at the time, the case is infamous enough now to say it is Mark Driscoll.

² When I first delivered this, a big news story had recently broke from our region about this.

How will the LORD rescue his people? In our passage, you can hear Ezekiel’s language of certainty. You can hear the sureness in the mission of the LORD through the repetitive use of the word “will.” The LORD will search, will rescue, will bring, will feed, will heal, and will strengthen his people. In the midst of all these bad shepherds, the LORD commits himself to be the shepherd all others failed to be. *The weak you have not strengthened...but I will strengthen the weak. The injured you have not bound up...but I will bind up the injured. The strayed you have not brought back...but I will bring back the strayed. The lost you have not sought...but I will seek the lost. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd...but I will be the shepherd of my sheep...declares the LORD God.* The contrast is obvious—where these bad shepherds failed, the LORD as the good shepherd will succeed.

The LORD will be the Shepherd

Ezekiel 34 is not the only place in the Hebrew Scriptures where the LORD is called the Shepherd of His People. In Genesis, both in preparation for his blessing to Joseph, and during his actual blessing to Joseph, Jacob clearly identifies the LORD as a shepherd.³ The Psalmist cries out to the LORD: *Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel* who led Joseph like a flock and sits enthroned.⁴ The prophet Jeremiah prophesies that the LORD will gather and keep his flock like a shepherd.⁵ In Isaiah’s first message to the post-exile community, he says *[The LORD] will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.*⁶ The LORD tends the flock; he gathers, carries, and leads the scattered. What a beautiful image of the compassion of the LORD for his people.

But none of these passages convey the LORD as shepherd quite as recognizably as Psalm 23: *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness*

³ Genesis 48:15, 49:23-24

⁴ Psalm 80:1

⁵ Jeremiah 31:10-17

⁶ Isaiah 40:11

and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

You can see some similarities between Psalm 23 and the second half of our passage from Ezekiel. *I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the LORD.*

Is the LORD or is the Messianic-David the promised one Shepherd?

But we have a conundrum. Our passage says the LORD is be *the* shepherd of his people (vs. 12), but our passage also says the LORD will set up servant David as *one shepherd* (vs.23). So is there one shepherd or two? The specific phraseology in Ezekiel regarding “servant David” matches depictions elsewhere of Messiah as the Branch of Jesse or the Branch of David. So the LORD will be the shepherd of Israel, yet also, the LORD will raise up another to be the shepherd of Israel, one messianic descendant of David. Even commentaries from contemporary Jewish sources do not contradict this twoness-in-oneness aspect to the LORD and Messiah both as one shepherd in this passage.⁷ In fact, organizations like Jews for Jesus use Ezekiel 34 to show unbelieving Jews how Jesus fulfills this passage by being both fully God and fully man, for both God and the messianic Servant David are united in one Spirit-anointed man Jesus.

John 10

“I AM the good shepherd,” Jesus says; a shepherd who leads the sheep correctly, a shepherd who entered by the door of the sheepfold. This shepherd is unlike the thieves and robbers who cheat their way into leadership; unlike those who take the sheep down roads that lead to destruction. This shepherd, by entering into leadership the correct way, is welcomed into the sheepfold by the gatekeeper, who in this discourse is God the Father. Jesus tells his audience that whoever enters into the sheepfold correctly must go through him—all truly God-anointed leaders are mediated through Christ. The shepherd makes a sound, calling out to his sheep, and his sheep follow his lead. His audience did not understand his words, so Jesus spoke more

⁷ Jewish Study Bible commentary on Ezekiel 34

plainly, declaring all who came before him to be the thieves and robbers who did not go through the door, and then claimed *“I AM the door...if anyone enters by me, he will be saved.”*

At the conclusion of Romans, we hear a warning against those who seek to divide the Church over doctrines and preserve their own power by using smooth words—telling the people precisely what their sinful selves already want to hear. This is what gives rise to heresies like the Prosperity Gospel, which would suggest that if you are constantly in financial hardship, or if you are struggling with an ongoing illness or addiction, or if your children walk away from the faith, then you must not believe enough. If you truly believed, then God would want to pay off your debt with unbelievable financial riches; God would want to zap away that cancer before you even knew you had it. By this, you can have your best life now.

What happens when a person falsely claims to be a God-anointed leader, but hops the fence in order to preach his own thoughts; his own smooth words, you know, those passages from “1 and 2 Opinions”? What happens? Devastating results for the sheep, for they only seek to steal, kill, and destroy the sheep. Jesus’ words force us to ask whether our leaders are Christ-centered and Christ-exclusive. God-anointed leaders who are Christ-centered and Christ-exclusive are those who steward well the flocks given to them and lead their sheep toward the pastures of salvation secured by the one who Peter calls the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4).

Jesus says: *“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”*

Modeled after the golden chain in Romans 8, retired pastor-theologian John Piper describes the work of the Chief Shepherd from the above passage as such: “Those whom the Father chose for himself he also gave to the Son. And for those who belong to the Son, he also laid down his life. Those for whom he laid down his life, he also called to himself. Those who he called heard his voice and followed him. To those who followed him, he gave eternal life. Those to whom he gave eternal life, cannot be taken out of his hand. Therefore, there will be forever one flock and one shepherd.”

For this reason, we call him “Christ.” The 31st Q&A of the Heidelberg Catechism says we call Jesus Christ “because he was ordained by the Father and anointed with the Spirit to be...

Our chief prophet and teacher who perfectly reveals to us the secret counsel and will of God for our deliverance,

Our only high priest who has set us free by the one sacrifice of his body, and who continually pleads our cause with the Father,

And our eternal king who governs us by his Word and Spirit, and who guards us and keeps us in the freedom he has won for us.”

All these shepherd imagery comes together in Christ. Jesus is our *Munus Triplex*. He is our prophet, our priest, and our king—he is the one messianic shepherd, our good shepherd who laid down his life for us, his sheep. Turn to him; run after him as your shepherd, for he is the only one who can lead you to the pastures of salvation. Jesus procured the forgiveness of your sins through his dying and secured your eternal salvation by his rising. Hear the sound of this shepherd calling out to you to follow the true Shepherd. Believe today in the death and resurrection of Christ, surrender your sinful will to the sinless will of God, and find peace at the eternal still waters to which he *will* lead you.

Let’s pray.