

“THE SHEEP OF HIS PASTURE”

I. Introduction

- A. In his handbook of pastoral theology, the Reformer Martin Bucer noted how Ezekiel 34 provides a wonderful summary of the biblical teaching on the care of souls.
1. As Bucer put it, “the pastoral ministry in the church has to be so extensive, in order that all the lost sheep should be sought out and brought into Christ’s sheep-pen, and that those who have once come to Christ and into his sheep-pen, but have become strays and outcasts again, should be restored; similarly, that the injured should be healed, the diseased and weak strengthened, and the sleek and strong well protected and rightly shepherded.” [*Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 73]
 2. Sheep have a variety of needs based on their condition, and the one thing that they all need is careful oversight.
 3. If such oversight is not provided, things will take a disastrous turn for them.
- B. This is precisely what had happened in ancient Israel.
1. Most of those tasked with the oversight of God’s people were guilty of gross neglect when it came to the performance of their duties.
 2. As a result, great harm came upon the flock.
 3. As we study this chapter tonight, we will consider how the Lord responded to this situation.

II. Unfaithful Shepherds

- A. The chapter begins with the Lord instructing Ezekiel to “prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.”
1. When we hear the term “shepherds,” we typically think of either a literal shepherd or of those who serve as metaphorical, spiritual shepherds in Christ’s church: pastors and elders.
 2. But in the world of the ancient Near East, when this word was used metaphorically, it was used in reference to kings.
 3. One Babylonian proverb said, “A people without a king is like a sheep without a shepherd.”
 4. Similarly, when Micaiah prophesied the death of King Ahab in 1 Kings 22, he said, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep without a shepherd.” (1 Kings 22:17)
 5. This tells us that it is Judah’s former kings who are mainly in view here in Ezekiel 34.
 6. This is confirmed by the fact that the Lord says that he will appoint an offspring of king David to serve as a faithful shepherd over his people.
- B. It is not very hard to understand why kings would come to be described as shepherds.
1. A king is supposed to look out for the welfare of those who are under his authority.
 2. The office of king is not merely about enjoying the privileges of monarchy but is also about being responsible for the well-being of a people.
 3. Israel’s kings had largely failed in this responsibility, and the Lord indicts them for their failure in the first part of this chapter.
 4. The book of Kings provides us with summaries of the reigns of Israel’s monarchs after it was divided into two kingdoms after the

death of Solomon.

5. If you have read Kings, you will recall that each king's reign is evaluated either by the summary statement, "[so and so] did what was right in the eyes of the LORD", or by the statement, "[so and so] did what was evil in the sight of the LORD."
 6. While all of the kings of Israel's northern kingdom were wicked, there were a handful of kings in the southern kingdom who were at least moderately faithful.
 7. Nevertheless, most had reigns that substantially contributed to the nation's spiritual and political death.
 8. This reminds us that the spiritual condition of God's people depends in large part on the faithfulness of those who are appointed to lead them.
- C. The Lord rebukes Israel's kings for exploiting their people for personal gain rather than watching over them and caring for them.
1. Instead of being a well-kept flock with the security of being under the care of an attentive shepherd, they went off in all sorts of directions and were an easy target for those who would prey upon them.
 2. As a result, the Lord declares that he is against Israel's shepherd-kings and will rescue his sheep from their abusive hands.
 3. In other words, the Lord is saying that he is bringing an end to the monarchy in Israel.
 4. This is exactly what happened after Judah's fall to Babylon.
 5. Even when the remnant returned to Palestine, they remained under foreign control.
 6. This raises a troubling question.

7. What does this say about the status of the Davidic covenant?
8. In 2 Samuel 7, the Lord told David that he would not cause his steadfast love to depart from David's offspring, as he had done with Saul.
9. And God promised that David's kingdom would be established before him for all eternity.
10. Do the Lord's words here in Ezekiel 34 mean that he is annulling the Davidic covenant?
11. We will see how that question is addressed by what the Lord has to say in the remainder of this chapter.

III. Israel's True Shepherd

- A. As we turn to the second part of the chapter, we see the other thing that the Lord does in response to the failure of Israel's human shepherds.
 1. Though he is bringing an end to the office of king in Israel, he is not going to leave his sheep without a shepherd.
 2. He says, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep."
 3. This is God's solution to the problem that was brought about by the unfaithfulness of Israel's kings.
 4. God will rescue his people from external threats, gathering them in from the places where they have been scattered and bringing them back into their own land.
 5. God will provide for their spiritual sustenance.
 6. He will seek out the lost, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak.

7. In addition, the Lord will also deal with the internal problems that pose threats to his people.
 8. Those in their midst who attain power and pay no regard for the weaker sheep will be called to account.
 9. The Lord will not let his flock be mishandled again.
- B. After describing how he will take care of his sheep, God then says, "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them and be their shepherd."
1. Here we find the answer to the question that we raised earlier about the Davidic covenant.
 2. God will be faithful to what he promised.
 3. Even though he ended the monarchy as an institution in Israel, he has not removed his steadfast love from David's line.
 4. God is going to raise up a new David, a better David, a David who will be the perfect shepherd over God's flock.
 5. God will be the shepherd of his people through this son of David, this one who will perfectly embody the kingly ideal.
 6. This figure is none other than Jesus, who was descended from David according to the flesh and begotten of God from all eternity.
 7. God has not revoked the Davidic covenant.
 8. He has sent his Son and given him the throne of his father David.
 9. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

IV. The Covenant of Peace

- A. We turn now to the third and final part of this chapter, which begins in verse 25.
1. Here we see the Lord explicitly using the word “covenant,” declaring that he will make with his people a “covenant of peace.”
 2. The description that follows makes it clear that this is the same thing as the “new covenant” that is described by the prophet Jeremiah.
 3. This covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, the final administration of the covenant of grace.
 4. Through the finished work of Christ in this new covenant, God secures peace between his people and himself.
 5. By providing atonement for our sins, he brings about a cessation of divine wrath and places us under his blessing.
 6. This state of blessing is pictured in our text by using terminology drawn from Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, texts where the Lord described the prosperity that he will pour down upon his people as a reward for their covenant faithfulness.
 7. God will bring his people to a place of perfect security.
 8. He will remove all predators, all threats, all oppressors.
 9. He will make the land fruitful and will provide for them abundantly.
- B. These blessings were held forth under the Mosaic covenant as the reward for covenant faithfulness.
1. Yet it is clear in this chapter that God’s people have not done anything to deserve this reward.
 2. They have not been faithful to the covenant.

3. In fact, the curses of the covenant have come upon them because of their covenant unfaithfulness.
4. How then, can they receive the blessings that belong to covenant-keepers?
5. They can receive them because God has provided a son of David to build a house for his name and thus merit the eternal kingdom.
6. Jesus has perfectly fulfilled God's law, and in him we are being built into a spiritual house for God.
7. The fact that these blessings are bestowed upon us by grace alone is made clear by the repeated use of the words "I will" in this chapter.
8. God is the one who accomplishes it all.
9. As the psalmist declares, "I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." (Ps. 118:21-23)

V. Conclusion

- A. What a marvelous thing it is for us to have the Lord as our shepherd.
- B. As John Newton once wrote to a friend, "Like sheep, we are weak, destitute, defenseless, prone to wander, unable to return, and always surrounded by wolves. But all is made up in the fulness, ability, wisdom, compassion, care, and faithfulness of our great Shepherd. He guides, protects, feeds, heals, and restores, and will be our guide and our God even unto death. Then he will meet us, receive us, and present us to himself, and we shall be near him, and like him, and with him forever." [Newton, *Letters*, 146]