

# Promise Keeper

*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31 ESV)*

*For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:33 ESV)*

## **The Good Shepherd**

**December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**Ezekiel 34:11-24**

**Rev. Levi denBok**

### **Introduction:**

Good morning! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Ezekiel 34.

This advent season we are making our way through the Old Testament and identifying the threads of promise that point forward to and find their fulfilment in the arrival of Jesus. As the great preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said:

It can never be pointed out too frequently that the great message of the Old Testament, and the great message of the New Testament, are really one.<sup>1</sup>

This Book in our hands is telling **one great story**. And it is the most important story in the world! It is the story of the God who made us to know Him and love Him and enjoy Him. It is the story of what went wrong – of our rebellion against God and the chaos that ensued. It is the story of how – in spite of our sin – God set a rescue mission in motion to redeem us and to restore us to who we were made to be. It is the story of how He is going to finally, once and for all, put an end to sin and bring His people home to Himself.

Perhaps you find yourself wondering, “But, what does this have to do with Christmas?” This has EVERYTHING to do with Christmas! Because this rescue mission – this plan to bring us back

---

<sup>1</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons* (East Peoria, IL: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 33.

into right relationship with God – was accomplished through the child who was laid in the manger. When we first sinned and the world came under the curse, God promised our enemy:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15 ESV)

God promised that a child would come who – at great cost to himself – would once and for all defeat our spiritual enemy and redeem and restore this broken world. And so, from the opening pages of the Bible we are watching and waiting for the child of promise.

When you were younger, did you ever draw those pictures where you would have a blank page with a series of numbered dots, and as you drew lines from one dot to the next the picture would come into focus? The Old Testament is like that. We are following a thread of promise – drawing a line from one dot to the next – and the further we look into the Old Testament the clearer the picture becomes.

Who is this child? What will he be? How will he set this world right?

With those questions in mind, please look with me now to Ezekiel 34. We will be reading verses 11-24. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

“For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. <sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> “As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. <sup>18</sup> 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? <sup>19</sup> And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

<sup>20</sup> “Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.<sup>21</sup> Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad,<sup>22</sup> I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken. (Ezekiel 34:11-24 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Last Sunday we were in the book of Isaiah and the northern tribes of Israel were being slaughtered by the army of Assyria. What we didn't see last Sunday was that the southern tribes repented. They turned from their sin and, in response, God miraculously delivered them from Assyria. The southern tribes of Israel and – more importantly – the city of Jerusalem was spared from disaster.

But Ezekiel is writing a generation later, and now the people of Judah have fallen back into the same pattern of sin. Wicked leaders misuse their authority. The rich take advantage of the poor. The nation worships idols. And the people of God look no different than the people of the world.

So, God sends the nation of Babylon to finish what the Assyrians started. The Babylonians overtake Jerusalem and send their captives back to Babylon. Ezekiel was one of those captives and our passage this morning was written while Ezekiel lived in Babylonian exile.

But in this moment of misery – as hope seems all but lost – God speaks a beautiful promise to His people. He promises that He will send a good shepherd to bring His people home. We're going to ask and answer two questions this morning. First:

### **Who Is The Good Shepherd Of Ezekiel 34?**

First, our passage teaches us that:

#### **1. The Good Shepherd will be God**

Look again with me at verse 15 where God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel and declares:

**I myself will be the shepherd** of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. (Ezekiel 34:15 ESV)

I hope and pray that you are able to see how beautiful this promise is.

God spoke this word of comfort to a people who were so far gone in their rebellion that they had lost the promised land – lost the temple – lost their autonomy – lost EVERYTHING! Sin has consequences, and the people who received this word of comfort had sinned so profoundly that their lives were forever changed. By all accounts, it looked like their story was over.

But it wasn't over yet.

God saw them in their mess, and He had compassion on them.

While there is no excuse for our sin, there *are* factors that can contribute to our failures. In this instance, the people who were *supposed* to teach the Israelites the word of God had failed. The king who was supposed to be a blessing to the people had become a curse. The leaders who were supposed to lead the people in righteousness were instead leading the way in rebellion. And even though the Israelites were responsible, God had compassion on a people who were living like sheep without a shepherd. He promised to do something about it. He promised that He himself would step in and that He would be the Good Shepherd. Matthew Henry writes:

The under-shepherds may prove careless, but the Chief Shepherd *neither slumbers nor sleeps*.<sup>2</sup>

Human leaders fall short. Some more so than others, but every earthly leader is tainted by sin. Therefore, it is incredibly good news that the Good Shepherd will be God Himself! And yet, as we continue reading, we also come to see that:

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary On The Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1112.

## 2. The Good Shepherd will be a descendent of David

Look again at verse 23:

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. (Ezekiel 34:23 ESV)

This raises some questions. First of all, at the time of this prophecy, David has been dead for nearly 400 years. So, is the hope that a resurrected David will become Israel's shepherd? No. This language is pointing forward to a future King in the line of David. As one commentator explains:

Its primary force is that the coming ruler will have the exemplary attributes of David - someone in whom the Lord delighted and who triumphed over the foes of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

Okay, so the Good Shepherd will be a King in the line of David. But in verse 15 God stated clearly that *He Himself* would be the Good Shepherd? So, which is it? Will the Good Shepherd be God? Or will he be a descendent of David?

Our passage last week prepared us to understand how this mystery fits together. Isaiah declared:

For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, **Mighty God**,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6 ESV)

Both Isaiah and Ezekiel are shedding light on the same mysterious reality. If we go back to the draw-by-number analogy, at this point in the tracing the picture is coming into focus; The child of promise will be more than a good king – he will be the God King! He will come from the royal line of David and he will lead and protect his people like a good shepherd leads and protects his flock. With Ezekiel's prophecy fresh in our minds, we are prepared to understand just exactly what Jesus was saying when he declared:

I am the good shepherd. (John 10:11a ESV)

---

<sup>3</sup> L. John McGregor et al. eds., *New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 739.

There is a REASON why God sent shepherds to be the first to meet the new born King. In sending them, God was drawing our attention back to the promise of Ezekiel 34 and making sure that we wouldn't miss the significance. The Good Shepherd has come!

Seeing that, let's ask one final question this morning:

### What Will The Good Shepherd Do?

God could have used any imagery. He could have said that the Messiah would be the Good Tax Collector, or the Good Carpenter, or the Good Baker. Why is the Messiah presented as a Good Shepherd? First, like a shepherd:

#### 1. He will seek and save the lost

Look with me at verse 12:

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. (Ezekiel 34:12 ESV)

In verse 16 he goes on to say:

**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 (Ezekiel 34:16a ESV)

Remember, those who first heard this promise were living in exile. At the time that this prophecy was delivered, they had just received a report that Jerusalem had been burned to the ground! The walls of the city that had once kept them safe had been turned to rubble. The homes that they had laughed and rested in had been raised. The temple that they had worshipped in was nothing more than a memory. The people who heard this promise were lost and homeless.

And it was their fault.

They had been scattered because of their own sin – because of their own rebellious choices. They had wandered and strayed and ignored their Maker and now they were lost with no one to blame but themselves.

In fact, the story of Israel's exile to Babylon is like a miniature portrait of the story of humanity. Because of our sin and rebellion we have all LOST what we once had and we have been DRIVEN AWAY from home and – most importantly – we have been SEPERATED from God. That was Israel's story and that is OUR story.

But THANKS BE TO GOD the Good Shepherd goes after those who are lost! Jesus told us a story that provides a glimpse into God's love for the lost. He explained:

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? <sup>13</sup> And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, **he rejoices over it** more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. <sup>14</sup> So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (Matthew 18:12-14 ESV)

The coming of the child of promise – the coming of the Good Shepherd – is a RESCUE MISSION!

Some of you are here today, and you've never thought much about Jesus, and you've never thought much about God, but as God's Word is going forth today you are sensing that there is something here. Deep down you realize that you ARE lost. Deep down, you realize that you HAVE rebelled against God. But please hear me today when I tell you that God sent His Son Jesus to BRING YOU BACK HOME! And He REJOICES when the lost come home!

Others of you are here, and you would say that you are a follower of Jesus, but you find yourself in an impossible mess. Have you experienced God's discipline in your life? The Israelites did. Discipline is painful, but we are reminded in this story that *discipline is not abandonment*. God wasn't done with Israel. And if you are here and you are experiencing a season of discipline in your life, please believe me when I tell you that He isn't done with you either! The author to the Hebrews asks:

have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
nor be weary when reproved by him.

**6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,**  
and chastises every son whom he receives.” (Hebrews 12:5-6 ESV)

In discipline, sometimes God scatters. He does it because He loves us. He does it because sometimes we need to be put on a time out so that we can come to our senses. But discipline is not abandonment. God wasn't done with Israel and He is not done with you. Jerry Bridges writes:

Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the **reach** of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are born beyond the **need** of God's grace.<sup>4</sup>

For as long as there is breath in your lungs, this story isn't over. You are NOT too far gone. You might be the biggest sinner in this room – you might be the worst sinner in this CITY – but the Good Shepherd is still ready to pick you up and bring you back to the fold. The Good Shepherd will seek and save the lost. And:

## 2. He will bring us safely home

Look again at verses 13-15:

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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. (Ezekiel 34:13-15 ESV)

The Israelites who first heard this prophecy would have heard this as a promise that they would be led back to Jerusalem. And that was part of it – to be sure. But we understand that this promise is *so much bigger* than that! The Israelites were eager to go home, but they weren't reaching back far enough in their memory. The Good Shepherd came to bring us ALL THE WAY HOME! He came

---

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Who Am I?* (Minneapolis, MN: Cruciform Press, 2012), 92.



to bring us all the way back to the garden – back before we fell – back before sin separated us from God!

This is why in the New Testament – even after the earthly city of Jerusalem has largely rejected Jesus and is later destroyed by the Romans – believers still look forward to a NEW Jerusalem. The Apostle John writes in Revelation 21:

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and **showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God** (Revelation 21:10 ESV)

This is no earthly city! This is a glimpse of the renewed creation! This is a glimpse of the world as it should be – the world as it WILL be – where there will be no more sin, and no more sickness, and no more death, and where we will finally be able to bask in the undiluted presence of the glory of God! THIS is the home that we long to return to.

Not only did the Good Shepherd come to lead us all the way home, but the Good Shepherd IS the way home! Jesus said:

**I am the door.** If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. (John 10:9 ESV)

The only reason why we can enter the New Jerusalem – the only reason why we can return to the garden and enjoy the presence of God – is because Jesus came to remove the one thing that created the distance in the first place. He came to put away our sin once and for all. Some shepherds fight bears. Some shepherds fight wolves. But Jesus fought SIN and DEATH!

In a rescue mission that exceeds our comprehension, the Son of God came down and dwelt among us. The theological term for that is the *incarnation* and it is what we celebrate each and every Christmas.

Having come to us, he bore our sin in his sinless body, and he took it with him to the cross where he was cursed and crucified in our place. At the cross, the child of promise – the Good Shepherd – died the death that we deserve. And in doing so, he removed the obstacle that kept us from coming home. It is *because* he is a Good Shepherd that he endured our cross. Jesus said:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11 ESV)

Three days later – when he rose from the grave – Jesus proved that a way has been made for us to finally come home. He is the way! He is the *door!* If we confess our sin and place our trust in Jesus then no matter who you are and what you’ve done, you can come home!

But, while it would be easy to end right here, our passage today tells us that there is one more thing that the Good Shepherd will do:

### 3. He will judge between the sheep and the goats

Look again at verses 17-19:

<sup>17</sup>“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: **Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats.** <sup>18</sup>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? <sup>19</sup>And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet? (Ezekiel 34:17-19 ESV)

The people who first heard this prophecy needed to hear a word of comfort – but they also needed to hear a word of warning. Remember, there was a REASON why they were scattered in Babylon. They were sinners. In their case, they were particularly marked by the sin of greed. The wealthy grew fatter and fatter leaving nothing for the poor. They turned a blind eye to those who were in need, and God hated it.

God HATES sin. And rightfully so. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says it well:

Every unhappiness in the human heart at this minute is due to sin. If sin had not entered into this world nobody would be unhappy; there was no unhappiness in life until sin came in.<sup>5</sup>

Sin has ruined everything. Therefore, we will never be home – that is, TRULY home – until sin has once and for all been dealt with. We are inclined to dislike the idea of *judgement*. But justice is

---

<sup>5</sup> Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 129.

what this world needs. If God is holy, then He cannot turn a blind eye to the injustice that exists all around us. Every wrong must be accounted for.

And every wrong WILL be accounted for.

In Jesus first coming, he extended an offer of grace and salvation to the world. The Good Shepherd came right down into our mess, and he made a way for us to come home. He offered to bear our sin in our place, and to settle our debt at the cross.

But, when we observe advent, we don't simply consider Christ's first coming. No, we remember that the day is approaching when he will come again. And on that day, the Good Shepherd will take his position at the seat of judgement, and every sin that was not paid for on the cross will be paid for in our flesh. Jesus was clearly alluding back to Ezekiel 34 when he warned:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> Before him will be gathered all the nations, **and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.** (Matthew 25:31-32 ESV)

One day, we will all stand before Him. The Good Shepherd will separate the sheep from the goats. He will identify those who are truly his, and he will separate out those who are still living in rebellion and holding onto their sin. And, having made that distinction, Jesus concludes:

**And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.** (Matthew 25:46 ESV)

The Good Shepherd will send those who are not his sheep into eternal punishment. That raises a question – the most important question you could ever ask: When you stand before the Good Shepherd, will he recognize you as one of his sheep? Jesus said:

**The sheep hear his voice**, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, **and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.** (John 10:3b-4 ESV)

Do you hear his voice today? Is he calling you back into the fold? Then come. Come and worship the child of promise. Come and bow before the Good Shepherd. Come and follow him all the way home. Let's pray together.