

The Shepherd

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[0 : 0 0] Well, in our evening services at the moment, we are looking at the book of Ezekiel, and we're highlighting what we're calling six epic images in this book.

It's a remarkable prophecy, and at various points in this book, we have some stunning images set before us that we're going to look at together.

You can see it there, we've got these amazing epic images that we're looking at. We're at number four this week, here's just a reminder of what we've looked at and what we're going to look at. We looked at the wheels and wings of chapter one, we looked at the abandoned baby of chapter 16, we looked at the watchman of chapter 33.

Tonight in chapter 34, we're looking at the shepherd. 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.

[1 : 1 7] Ezekiel's not the most commonly read book of the Bible, even though it's one of the biggest, it's not one that we go to very often. And in lots of ways, it's maybe not the easiest book of the Bible to understand, it can feel a little bit inaccessible.

But with a wee bit of help, we can open up this book, and when we do, we see that it reveals some stunning teaching. As we said when we were reading it, Ezekiel comes at a very important time in the history of God's people in the Old Testament.

If you want to summarize the history of the story of God's people in the Old Testament, so wee bit like a Nike tic, so if you've got a set of Nike shoes on or anything, you can see it's a tic, it kind of goes down, and then there's wee upturn at the bottom.

And that's the story of God's people in the Old Testament, it's down, down, down, down, down, down, and there's like a tiny wee up bit at the end. But just at the very bottom, at the lowest point, that's when Ezekiel comes.

They've lost the nation. They've lost the city of Jerusalem. They've lost the temple. The nation's just in a mess.

[2 : 2 8] As we approach Ezekiel, or as we approach any other prophecy in the Old Testament, there's two key words to remember. I'm sure that you know these, those who have been here for the last three weeks, because we've tried to highlight them several times.

Whenever you approach any prophecy, two key words you want to remember, judgment and salvation. Remember if you like, warning and hope.

All the prophets in the Old Testament came to warn the people, because they were turning away from God, they were rebelling against Him, and they were forgetting about Him. The prophets came to warn them not to do that.

And at the same time, they came with a message of hope. No matter how bad things were, God was calling the people back.

And perhaps the most powerful example of this twofold message of judgment and salvation is found in Ezekiel chapter 34.

- [3 : 33] The chapter is based around the image of a shepherd. Now sometimes when we think about a shepherd and sheep, we can have immediately in our minds the idea of a kind of tranquil and peaceful image.

So as an experiment, I typed in shepherd to Google images, and all the pictures that come up are so idyllic. You just see this beautiful scenery and green grass and lovely sheep.

And in our minds, we can have the idea of lambs skipping about the place and everything just looking so rosy. But that's probably not what the reality is like, 99% of the time.

Many crofters in the highlands of Scotland will tell you that there are not many days of sunshine, peace and tranquility in the life of a shepherd in Scotland.

And if that's not true of our country today, it is most definitely not true of a shepherd in the Old Testament. And you can see that if you look closely through the chapter. As we read, you heard mention of things like wild beasts, rugged mountainous landscape and bad weather.

- [4 : 45] The shepherd of the Old Testament didn't just lie in the sunshine with all his sheep just relaxing beside him. It was a brutal job.

A shepherd had to lead his flock through harsh terrain. He had to find food for them. He had to defend the sheep from predators. He had to strengthen the weak. He had to carry the injured. He had to go and rescue the lost.

A shepherd had to be brave, strong, determined and he needed a huge amount of stamina. Would you ever fight a lion?

Would you ever sleep in a ravine? Would you drive a herd of sheep or cattle across mountains?

The shepherd is not a tranquil image. It's an epic image.

- [5 : 42] But it's very important to remember that Ezekiel 34 is not actually talking about shepherds. It's actually about leadership.

And this shepherd image is a metaphor for the leaders of Israel. Chapter begins in verse 1, 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, Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves should not shepherds feed the sheep.

And at the very end of the chapter, it says, they shall know that I and the Lord their God with them, that they the house of Israel are my people. You are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture.

So when Ezekiel 34 talks about sheep, it's talking about people. God's people. And when it talks about shepherds, it's talking about Israel's leaders.

And the ultimate example of that leader shepherd was the king. The prime example of that is David. He was a shepherd and he became the model king against whom all other Old Testament kings were measured.

- [6 : 54] And when he became king, the people said to him, the Lord said to you, you shall be shepherd of my people Israel. You shall be prince over Israel.

And from David onwards, the rulers of Israel were to be shepherds who led their people, who protected their people, who defended their people, who provided for their people, who always looked out for their people.

And I just want to pause for a moment there because this is where we are being reminded of the biblical definition of good leadership. So in the Bible, whenever somebody is given the authority or power that comes with leadership, with that there always comes a major duty of care towards those who've been placed under you.

And for everybody in here who's in the position of leadership in your work or in other areas or for any of you who will aspire to be in a position of leadership, that is something that you must never, ever forget.

Neil said 100% of people have hassle at work in Scotland. That's probably true. And I'm sure that the hassle just gets worse the higher up the ladder you go.

[8 : 18] And for a lot of people here, you face targets. You face targets in terms of performance or efficiency or cost cutting or marketing or whatever it is. These are all a heavy burden.

You go to work, you've got targets. If you're a boss, what is God's number one target for you? His number one target is to make sure that the people under you are well cared for and safe and looked after.

Now, that's the biblical model of good leadership. And wouldn't it be brilliant if all your bosses were just like that?

The Bible's got a lot to say still today. So Ezekiel 34 is using this image of a shepherd and that's to give Israel a message, especially their leadership, to give them a message at a time, as we said, when the nation has fallen apart.

And in the first instance, that message is a stark message of judgment. Thus says the Lord God, behold, I am against the shepherds.

[9 : 29] But as we'll see, this chapter also contains a remarkable message of salvation and hope. Now, there's an enormous amount of teaching in this chapter and we're only going to barely scratch the surface.

We won't even touch the surface, I think. Let alone scratch it. And I want to highlight three things and they're all based around the simple question which is asking, what does this chapter teach us about God? And I think that's a great question to always ask whenever you come to any chapter in the Bible.

And we're going to pick out three things that we learn about God from this. And they are the frustration of God, the compassion of God, and the determination of God.

So first, the frustration of God. When we think about God's attributes, our focus tends to be on things like the holiness of God or the power of God or the love of God.

We don't often think or talk about the frustration of God. If anything, it can almost seem slightly inappropriate to say something like that.

[10 : 34] But I do think that looking at this chapter, it's clear that God is deeply frustrated with Israel's leadership. In fact, he's absolutely appalled at the way in which these leaders have been behaving.

Why is that? Well, the reason that he's so frustrated is because Israel's leaders have utterly abused their position and they have horribly exploited the people who were under their care.

The first few verses make that so clear. We can pick it up at verse three. It says, 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've not strengthened, the sick you've not healed, the injured you've not bound up, the strayed you've not brought back, the lost you have not sought and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

And so these shepherds, these leaders, instead of caring for the flock, they were exploiting them. In other words, they were fleecing their own flock. And God's response to that is one of deep and profound frustration.

[11 : 43] Now it's easy for us to think that the frustration of God would be a negative thing. We don't necessarily like the idea of God being frustrated or speaking in that way. But what I hope this chapter shows us is that the frustration of God is a beautiful and wonderful thing.

And to see that, we have to first of all ask ourselves the question, what frustrates us? What frustrates you?

And what frustrates the culture around us? What would you say to that? Well, there's lots of things but I'm still fairly new to Edinburgh.

Those of you who are visiting won't know that but we moved here last summer. And one of the things that has really struck me and that I've really been quite surprised about and I don't think I'll ever get used to, is how frustrated people get in regard to driving and traffic.

So the other day I was making my way in to work here quite peacefully and I saw a cyclist coming across the pathway, across the cycleway. And there was a pedestrian walking down, the cyclist pinging their bell.

[12 : 56] The pedestrian had headphones in their ears so couldn't hear a thing. And the cyclist kind of shot past in front of the pedestrian, quite close and had to make him stop. The pedestrian went ballistic.

And he pretty much started chasing the bike down the road, shouting at him. I know of somebody else who had a note put through their gate complaining about their parking because somebody had dumped their car in front of their house.

It wasn't even their car but somebody had seen this car with the wheel on the curb and had written an expletive filled letter complaining about this parking which wasn't even the person's car anyway.

It's quite astonishing how frustrated people can get. I'm sure you can think of examples yourselves. I'm sure there's other areas where people get frustrated.

Neil said to go on Instagram and Twitter and Facebook. You can find lots of great stuff but also these places are a great place to go to find frustration if you're looking for it.

[14 : 02] We can often get very frustrated by things and maybe it's a good question to ask yourself what frustrated me in the last week. But a mean even more important question is what frustrates God?

The answer that Ezekiel 34 gives us is on the screen in front of you. It's when powerful people rip off the vulnerable people around them and treat them with harshness and make themselves richer and more comfortable at the expense of other people.

The sick you've not healed, the injured you've not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, that is what frustrates God immensely.

And that tells us that God cares deeply about people. His frustration is not a character flaw like it so often is in us.

It's actually a sign of his integrity, his justice and his mercy. So I've seen people raging because a car in front of them is in the wrong lane.

[15 : 16] I've seen people raging because somebody in front of them is struggling to park. I've seen people raging because a plane is delayed. I've seen people raging because of the threat of climate change.

I've never seen anyone raging because they've seen a child who has to wear the same clothes every day. I've never seen anyone raging because there's people going to food banks.

Now, I'm not saying that people don't care about these things. People do. I know that they do and that's a good thing. But what I mean is that instinctive reaction of deep frustration when the vulnerable are exploited.

We are numb to it. And programs like Jeremy Kyle tell us that we're entertained by it.

Now I can think of one exception to this. I can think of one person who saw vulnerable people being exploited. And he actually physically saw people who had kind of commercial enterprises set up so that they were sucking every penny that they could out of these most vulnerable people in society.

[16 : 42] And they were doing that in order to make themselves richer. And this person saw them. He actually saw them at their work, saw them gathering their income from these people.

And he literally went in among them and he threw their money on the ground. And he told them to get out.

Do you know that person's name? Jesus Christ. God is deeply frustrated in this chapter because the powerful are fleecing the vulnerable.

God's frustration is a beautiful thing. When I look at myself and I need to pray, Lord, please make my frustrations the same as your frustrations.

So Ezekiel 34 reveals the frustration of God. That frustration is directed towards these leaders who failed in their responsibilities and who've abused those underneath them.

[17 : 47] God is frustrated with the shepherds. But if he is frustrated with the shepherds, what does he think of the sheep? Well, if we go back to that imagery of shepherds and sheep, there's another really important point that we can easily misunderstand.

And we were saying at the start that you can easily think that being a shepherd's an easy job because it's all tranquil and peaceful and warm and lovely. And we can also think that looking after sheep is a very kind of relaxing and stress-free activity to be involved in.

Again, that's a misconception because the truth is sheep are incredibly annoying animals.

Any of you who've had any experience with sheep will know that. I mean, I've never been a crofter or a shepherd or anything like that, but I've had plenty of experience with sheep even just from driving along the road.

So where I come from in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, you can be driving along the road and there can be a sheep just having a snooze in the middle of the road. Quite happy. And you have to stop.

[18 : 59] And the sheep gets up and it kind of will walk about a wee bit. It'll walk towards you a wee bit. It'll wander around a wee bit. Meanwhile, a few of its friends will come onto the road and they're just incredibly annoying.

I know friends who are more involved in sheep and they go to gather the sheep from the top of the hill. They climb up this hill. They bring them all down and they're just about down and one of them decides, oh no, I think I'll go back up to the top again.

And the rest of them follow them all back up again as well. And the whole thing becomes incredibly frustrating. Sheep are very frustrating animals.

And of course, the truth is people can be very frustrating as well. And the remarkable thing that is being shown in the imagery of this chapter is that not one ounce of God's frustration is directed towards the struggling sheep.

Instead, he shows them the most profound compassion. Think again at verse four and you'll see the kind of key words that have been highlighted to describe the members of the flock.

[20 : 14] It speaks about the weak, the sick, the injured, the strayed and the lost. And this is a remarkable verse four.

God's frustration with the well-fed shepherds arises from his deep compassion towards the most vulnerable in his flock.

Imagine being a shepherd for a moment yourselves that you've got this flock of sheep. You're trying to move them from one place to another. So imagine that you were just maybe trying to take them to the meadows for some lovely grazing down there.

And you're making your way from here down to the meadows. You try to move forward, but the weak ones are holding you back and others are getting sick and slowing down.

You carry on a bit more, some of them stumble, they get injured. They need help too. You need to go and you actually have to carry a couple of them. And then half a dozen of them wander off.

[21 : 12] You go after them, you find two, but the other three or four are nowhere to be seen. You're going to have to stop and go and look for them and see if you can find them. These sick, weak, injured, straying sheep are such a burden and such a pain.

But God says they're not a pain. They're my sheep and they are the priority.

And this is why Ezekiel 34 is one of the many chapters in the Old Testament that reveals the extraordinary compassion of God. As we've been saying, in many ways, the Old Testament is a story of failure.

The kings failed, the nation failed, the people failed. Ezekiel is the prophet at the lowest point of all. Jerusalem's fallen. They're all in exile in Babylon. He is prophesying to a failed nation.

But at the same time, the Old Testament is a story of never failure. Because in it all, no matter how weak, sick, injured or lost the people, where God's mercy, compassion and love never, ever fails.

[22 : 34] And the compassion that has been shown by God in this chapter towards the sheep is a huge comfort to us. Because in our Christian lives, it is so easy to think that our weaknesses and our failings are frustrating and annoying to God.

So often in my life, I look at myself and I see my own failings as a Christian. And I think that God must be so fed up of me. And you can look at yourself and think the same.

You can think, I'm so weak in my faith. I'm so sick in my mind and in my body. I'm injured and bruised by my life and everything that's happened.

I stray from God so often and sometimes I just feel so lost. And in all of that brokenness, what does God think of you?

He says, you are my sheep and I love you so much.

[23 : 45] And that's proved by the third thing that we see in this chapter, the determination of God.

Ezekiel 34 delivers a firm message of judgment against the leadership of Israel. God is not happy at how they have treated the people. The situation described in the chapter is a mess.

The stronger just getting stronger, the weaker just getting weaker. The people are being exploited and as a result, everyone's just broken and scattered.

The shepherds have failed, the flock is disintegrating, the people are broken. And that's what's been described before us in terms of this sheep. The sheep, the flock is a mess and that's exactly the reality faced by the people of Israel.

The nations collapsed, 80, 85% of the nation had been destroyed 200 years earlier by the Assyrians. What was left is kind of all over the place. Some of them are in Babylon.

[24 : 43] Some of them fled to Egypt and a few of the weakest ones are left in the wreckage of Jerusalem itself. The shepherding of this nation, the protecting of them, the guidance, the provision, the security, the defence that a shepherd is meant to provide has been a complete and total failure.

Israel's shepherds have been a disaster, but God's response is amazing. All of Israel's shepherds have failed.

So God says, I'll do it. For thus says the Lord God, behold, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.

As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he's among his sheep that have been scattered, so I will seek out my sheep and I will rescue them from all places where they've been scattered on a day of cloud 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.

[26 : 08] I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord. I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strayed and I will bind up the injured and I will strengthen the weak.

The fatten the strong I'll destroy. I will feed them injustice. God's response is not to moan about the shepherds or to lament their failings or to give up on these broken sheep.

He looks at the weak, the sick, the strayed, the lost people and he says, I will be their shepherd. I will lead them. I will provide for them.

I will defend them. I will find them. I will rescue them. And you know there's a sense in which the whole of the Bible, the whole of the Christian message, the whole of Reformed theology, the whole of Calvinism as we call it can be summed up in three words from God.

I'll do it. And the failure of the Old Testament leaders and of the Old Testament people shows us that on our own we can't do it.

[27 : 16] We can't save ourselves. We can't be our own shepherds. We can't fix our own problems. What we desperately need is for God to do it for us.

And the amazing thing about God is that he is absolutely determined to do it.

And that's what this chapter promises. We come to the end and he says, 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. Now there's a sense in which that's looking back because it's pointing back to David, who was the great model king.

But in reality, verses like these are looking forward because they are pointing us towards Jesus Christ. He is the great descendant of David who is going to take his place on God's throne.

[28 : 17] He is the good shepherd. He is the one through whom God's message of salvation is going to come. And everything that we are seeing here is pointing us towards Jesus.

And in many ways, he's the perfect model of what we've been looking at. As we said, he was deeply frustrated when he saw people being exploited.

He was incredibly compassionate towards people in desperate need. But most of all, he is utterly determined to rescue his flock.

And that determination took Jesus to the cross. And there the shepherd laid down his life for the sheep.

And never ever forget that God knew that. So when God says in Ezekiel 34, I'll do it.

[29 : 23] I'll be the shepherd of my sheep. He knew that that would not mean going out into the hills and finding people. He knew that that didn't mean going to fight wild beasts.

He knew that that didn't mean being exposed to bad weather. He knew it meant far, far more than that.

He knew it meant death. And yet God the Son still says, I'll do it.

And he did it because this epic shepherd is determined to save you.

Let's pray. Dear God our Father, we thank you so much that you are frustrated by all the horribleness in this world.

[30 : 35] And that you are compassionate to all of us who are broken. And that you are so utterly determined to bring us hope through your Son Jesus Christ.

And we thank you for Jesus, our amazing shepherd. And we just place all our security and hope in you because we need you so much.

Amen.