

The Shepherd King

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Preacher: Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] As we turn to God's word, let's pray. Dear God, as we have your word open before us, we acknowledge that we are completely dependent on you, and we pray that you would be our shepherd, leading us into your world and feeding and nourishing us from it.

In Jesus' name, amen. This month in the run-up to Christmas, we are doing a very short series that we've called Forgotten King.

The title is brief, but it actually tells us two things that I think are absolutely true of Scotland in 2018.

The first thing that's true of Scotland in 2018 is that Jesus is forgotten. So in all the busyness of getting ready for Christmas, and all the fun of the lights in the market, and all the excitement of toys and food and everything else, which is all great, but in all of that, Jesus is forgotten.

But it's also true that Jesus is still king. And the fact that Jesus is forgotten by so many has absolutely no bearing whatsoever on the fact that Jesus is the king.

[1 : 17] This reigns over every single square inch of the universe, and whether Scotland remembers it or not, 2,000 years ago, the king of the universe was born in Bethlehem.

And the whole of history and the whole of the Bible is centered on the fact that Jesus has come. And that's why we want to think about that as we study these sermons together.

We want to remember and learn and worship the forgotten king. And there's various emphasis that the Bible gives us in regard to what this king is going to do.

And last week, Derek introduced us to the series with the title King of Peace, the fact that in a world that is broken, in a world that is full of chaos and despair, Jesus brings us peace.

Today we're going to turn to Matthew chapter 2 and the short passage which we read about the wise men coming and inquiring, where is the one who is to be king of the Jews?

[2 : 23] Where is he to be born? And the answer that was given to him was that he was to be born in Bethlehem. As we read, you or Bethlehem in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

And we're going to think about the biblical theme of the shepherd king. Now I want you to start by just using your imagination and thinking of a typical nativity scene that you would see.

We see them all the time. Maybe you've even got one in your house. We often have this image. You have a stable or a cave where everyone's gathered, you have Mary and Joseph, you have the animals, you have the manger, you have the shepherds.

We have this scene in our minds. Now often there may be two or three shepherds, but we don't actually know how many shepherds there were. The Bible doesn't tell us, but the Bible does tell us that there's one shepherd in that nativity scene who's of particular importance.

One of these shepherds is the chief, which of course raises the question, which one is the chief shepherd? And the answer is the one lying in the manger.

[3 : 47] Jesus is the shepherd king. He is the one who has come to rule his people.

And he is our focus today. We're going to look at this great theme of the shepherd king running through scripture. Here's a list of six famous figures from the Old Testament.

Abel, Abraham, Jacob, who was also known as Israel, Rachel, who was Israel's wife, Moses, David. They all have one thing in common. What is it?

They were shepherds. They were all shepherds. And it's a big theme running through the Old Testament. At various points, we are shown what the characteristics of a good shepherd are.

I'm going to just give you four brief examples. You can look at many, many others, highlighting what makes a good shepherd in the Old Testament. Isaiah 40 says, he will tend his flock like a shepherd.

[4 : 52] He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those who are with young. Amos chapter three speaks about it too, a shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion.

Two legs are a piece of a near social, the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued. Micah chapter five, he shall stand and shepherd his flock. They shall dwell secure.

And of course, perhaps the most famous shepherd version, the whole of the Old Testament, the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

These and other verses tell us what a good shepherd looks like. There's key things that a shepherd does. And I've got a list just summarizing them for you here. So a shepherd does these five things.

He leads and guides his flock. A flock is completely dependent on their shepherd to show them where to go. They don't know how to navigate the wilderness.

[5 : 52] They don't know how to find water or pasture. He is their guide. They follow him. A shepherd needs to be wise. He's the leader of the flock. A shepherd also provides food and water.

And so if you think back to the ancient Near East, it wasn't like shepherding in Scotland where rain comes maybe far too often. You had to go looking for water and food.

And it was the shepherd's responsibility to make sure that the flock had the nourishment that they needed. So a shepherd really needs to be attentive to those needs. Number three, a shepherd carries the weak and the hurt.

So a good shepherd would never abandon a hurt animal. So you imagine you're traveling through the wilderness of Judah. You've got a long, long way to go. And you see at the back of the flock, there's a wee sheep that starts to limp.

And it starts to lag behind. And it would be the easiest thing in the world to think, oh, I'll just leave it behind. But a good shepherd would never do that. They would tend to their injuries, help them with their weakness.

[7 : 01] And if necessary, pick them up and carry them themselves. A shepherd needs to be compassionate and tender. Number four, the shepherd gathers the lost or the wandering.

Sheep are particularly prone to wandering off. And it's a shepherd's job to bring them back. Like a shepherd never says, oh, well, tough serves them right because they've wandered off. The shepherd is never casual about any of his animals.

If one wanders off, it means that his flock is now incomplete. And he goes and finds that one animal in order to bring it back. A shepherd is watchful and ready to go after those who stray.

And number five, a shepherd will protect their flock from danger. Flocks in the Old Testament faced many predators. And the shepherd's job was to provide protection.

David speaks about that in 1 Samuel chapter 17 when he speaks to Saul. He said, I used to keep sheep from my father. And when a lion came or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and rescued the lamb from out of its mouth.

[8 : 06] That means that a shepherd in the Old Testament has to be incredibly courageous. It's really easy to think that being a shepherd is kind of a tranquil job.

So you imagine this idyllic scene of a shepherd standing with his staff and watching the flock on the hillside. And it's also green and peaceful and nice.

In our imagination, it can look a bit soft. But the real truth is not soft at all because in the Old Testament, a shepherd needs to be a lion killer.

Could you pick a fight with a lion or a bear? I definitely wouldn't. But that's what a shepherd had to do in those days. So to be a shepherd in the Old Testament, you need the wisdom and the stamina to navigate vast areas of wilderness to locate grazing and water all year round.

You need the determination to go and find out wandering animals if they've strayed. You need to be strong enough and brave enough to kill a lion or a bear.

[9 : 13] But you need to be gentle enough to nourish and carry a lamb with a sore leg. And with a good shepherd like that, the flock is safe and secure.

It's free from hunger, free from fear, free from isolation. They have a wonderful, wonderful existence when they have a good shepherd.

So that's the general principles of shepherding in the Old Testament. There's a couple of things which we have to look at in a wee bit more detail because if you look at the Old Testament, you'll see that the role of the shepherd is linked to two really important things.

First of all, there is a key link between shepherding and ruling. In biblical times, a ruler, a prince, a king, a leader was often regarded as a shepherd.

So for example, when God speaks to Moses about planning a successor, he says, you need to set somebody over the congregation so that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.

[10 : 22] There's this key link between shepherding and ruling. And it's very easy to see why. A ruler needs to be wise because he has to lead and guide the people who are under him. A ruler needs to provide for their needs to make sure they have sustenance and provision.

A ruler needs to help those who are vulnerable and a ruler needs to protect his people. So it's very simple. A good ruler is a good shepherd. And that's why the definitive model of leadership in the Old Testament is David.

He is the model king because he was the shepherd who became Israel's greatest king. David had failures in his life in other ways, which we don't have time to go into, but he's still regarded as the model king.

He was the model shepherd. So shepherding is a key leadership skill in the Old Testament. That's why God absolutely hates it.

Absolutely hates it when rulers in the Old Testament failed to shepherd their flock. So you can read prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah and Zachariah, and they will all absolutely nail the shepherds who are abusing their flocks.

[11 : 52] They constantly rebuke them. And the greatest example of that, I think, is the passage that Russell read for us. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of Man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.

Now that's not a prophecy against the guys who look after the sheep in Israel. It's a prophecy against the rulers and against the leaders. Thus says the Lord, shepherds, you've been feeding yourselves.

You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves, and you slaughter your things for yourself, but you don't feed the sheep. You're not looking after the people. The weak you have 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've not sought, with force and harshness you have ruled them.

So they were scattered because there was no shepherd. And leaders exploited the people under them when they abandoned those who were weak and when they only looked after themselves.

It is utterly appalling in the sight of God. God is so, so concerned for justice and fairness to all people across society.

[13 : 09] Now I want to just pause for two minutes here because there's a lot of rulers in this room, I think.

Now, I don't think there's any kings or queens or princes, but there are people here who hold positions of leadership and responsibility over others in their daily lives.

So there are supervisors here, there's teachers, there's business partners, team leaders, there's in the church, elders, deacons, there's parents, there's even big brothers and sisters.

You all have a ruling role in different ways. Many people in here are bosses, either in your work or in your family.

You have a ruling role, I think, many of you. And that of course means that this shepherding imagery applies to you too.

[14 : 08] So what would a biblical shepherd boss look like in 2018? Those of you who are a boss in the week ahead, what would a biblical shepherd look like?

Well, they would look exactly the same as what we saw in the Old Testament. They would lead and guide the people who are under them. So you would guide your staff, showing them where you need to go, showing them how to get there.

It doesn't mean you give them an easy time because sometimes shepherdhood means facing challenges and overcoming mountains and valleys and hills. But you show people where you're going and you lead them.

A good shepherd boss provides for their staff or for their students so that they have what they need in order to flourish. A good shepherd boss would be brave, ready to protect their staff if things go wrong, never exposing them to blame in order to protect themselves.

A good shepherd boss would have the courage to warn their staff against danger. So if people who work under you are heading in a direction that is not good, you would have the bravery to say to them, you need to come back.

[15 : 21] And you would also be ready to carry those who are hurting and struggling. A good boss would be gentle and supportive to those who are finding it hard.

It would work to restore these people to full participation in the flock. Wouldn't it be brilliant to have a boss like that?

And what I want you to recognize is that you can be that boss. All of you who are rulers, you can be that tomorrow.

And it's a great reminder that in Edinburgh, which is full of bosses, the Christians should stand out as the ones who are the best to work for.

And the pinnacle of good leadership, of good shepherds, should be found in the church.

[16 : 22] If you look at the New Testament, the whole concept of leadership is grounded in this image of a shepherd. These are the characteristics that should shape everything that we do in the church as well.

And there's an important lesson here from the shepherd image, because often we judge the quality of leadership by the health of the leader. So you tend to think to yourself, well, a business is doing really well if the owner has got a huge house or a really cool car and they look like they're getting on really well.

A team at work might be doing well if their supervisor is hitting their targets or gaining a good name for themselves in the company. And even a church, even a church can be judged in terms of its health when the minister is drawing crowds or publishing books or speaking all over the world or getting himself quoted here, there and everywhere.

We can easily judge the health of a workplace or the health of a church by looking at the condition of the leader. But the shepherd image tells us that that is completely foolish.

Because if you were to go next summer to the Carlaway Agricultural Show, so I used to be a minister in a wee village in Carlaway, way up in the western isles of Scotland.

[17 : 48] Every year they have the Carlaway Agricultural Show where you will see shepherds being assessed in competitions to see who is the best.

And if you were to go there, which I highly recommend, forget the festival, Edinburgh Festival, forget it. Carlaway Show is where it's at. If you go there and you look at where shepherds are being judged, you will see that no one takes the slightest bit of notice at what the shepherd is wearing or at what car he drives or at what wealth they have gathered.

In order to judge the shepherd, the judges are looking at one thing. They're looking at the sheep.

And so in the workplace and in the church, our success as leaders is not measured by how healthy we are. It's measured by the health of our flock.

And that's a really important thing to remember. The Old Testament makes a key link between the shepherd and ruling. And tragically, as Ezekiel told us, Israel failed.

[19 : 00] Israel's leaders failed in that duty again and again. But there's another key link in the Old Testament that we have to recognise as well. There's a link between shepherding and ruling, but there's also a link between shepherding and worship.

If you go all the way back to Abel, we'll see that his role as a shepherd played a key part in the worship of God. Abel came to God and offered him a firstborn of his flock, which unlike Abel's brother Cain, was an acceptable sacrifice to God.

You read on and you'll see that Noah and Abraham also offered animals from their flock as acts of worship to God. And later in the Old Testament, you read the book of Leviticus and you'll see this huge sacrificial system being established.

And at the heart of it is the offering of animals from the flock. In the Old Testament, a key means of worship, a key means through which God could be approached, was through the offering of sacrifices.

And the shepherds had a key role in rearing and providing the animals for that purpose. The best of their flocks was to be offered to the Lord.

[20 : 21] And the reason these offerings were necessary was to show the Israelites that atonement for sin was only possible through the shedding of blood.

It's always important to remember that the consequence of sin is death. That's an inescapable fact. So sin brings death, absolutely inescapable connection, no exceptions.

The only way a sinner can be saved is that the guaranteed death which sin has caused is transferred to another.

Death will always result from sin. But the sacrificial system pointed to the fact that forgiveness could be found through the provision of a substitute.

That's why it's the blood that makes the atonement. That's why without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. Without these sacrifices, it was impossible to approach God.

[21 : 25] And for these offerings to take place, the shepherds had a key role. Right through the Old Testament, there's a key link between shepherding and worship.

So we've got these two things, two images, two aspects of life as the people of God in the Old Testament which are related to the shepherd image. The shepherd is a model about how to rule well.

The shepherd is a means for providing the sacrifices by which relationship with God was possible. In other words, God's people need shepherds to rule them.

And they need shepherds to provide a sacrifice. And so we've got a wee picture here just to show you these two aspects.

The history of the Old Testament was one of failure. In both these areas, the people failed.

[22 : 25] And in many ways, these two are almost linked because when the leadership of Israel failed in their shepherding, the sacrifices that were being offered through the provision of the shepherds became worthless.

An important chapter in that regard is Isaiah chapter one. Here's God speaking to Israel and he's talking about their worship and he says, what to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?

I've had enough of burnt offerings of rams. So you've got all the sacrificial system and yet God has said, I've had enough of this. Why?

What's gone wrong? Well, verse 23 tells us, your princes, your rulers are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless and the widows cause does not come to them.

So in other words, God is saying your sacrifices are becoming worthless because your shepherding is corrupt. You're not looking after people in the way that you're supposed to do.

[23 : 27] The Old Testament Israelites failed. And so how does God respond?

He says, I'll do it myself. And that's what we read in Ezekiel 34. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep.

I will make them lie down. I will seek the lost. I will bring that back to sit. I will do it. And at the heart of that is God's ruler. I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them, he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

I, the Lord will be their God and my servant David shall be Prince among them. For the people of God at the close of the Old Testament period, there is this massive, massive need for the shepherd king to come.

And that's why in Matthew it is so exciting because he's arrived. Finally, we have the perfect shepherd king.

[24 : 47] And if you go through the rest of Matthew's gospel or any other gospel, you'll discover that Jesus perfectly models all the characteristics of a shepherd king. So we go back to our list.

You'll see that Jesus leads and guides his people. He provides perfect leadership and guidance. That's why he went around teaching people.

He went around showing them what they needed to do. He explained what was right and wrong. He revealed the truth of God to us. He leads and guides his flock, which is why if you feel spiritually lost today, Jesus is saying, follow me and I will lead and guide you.

And if you do put your trust in Jesus, then your shepherd king will be your guide through every step of life. You read about Jesus, you'll see that he provided for his people.

He provides the nourishment that his people need. He did that physically. He fed 5,000 people. But that's simply pointing us to the spiritual nourishment that he provides for us.

[25 : 53] He provides us with the knowledge and understanding that we really need. So if you are spiritually hungry or thirsty today, Jesus says, come to me.

I'll provide for you and you'll never be thirsty again. Jesus also carried the weak and the broken.

And so Jesus goes to the people who have been hurt in the world and he heals them. And you see him performing that with amazing compassion and care.

So if you have wounds from the past week, if you've got scars from mistakes that you've made in your life, if you're limping along and struggling to keep going, what does the perfect shepherd king want to do with you?

Does he just want to leave you behind and carry on with all the others who are actually stronger and better than you? No.

[27 : 06] He wants to pick you up and carry you and restore you and help you. Jesus gathered the lost and the wandering.

So Jesus' shepherd king traveled around looking for people who were lost and he brought them back. So whether it was vulnerable women who had fallen into prostitution or corrupt tax collectors who had all their priorities wrong, whether it was violent madmen who were mentally broken, whether it was religious fanatics, confused fishermen or broken families, Jesus sought them out.

And that's what Jesus has done to every one of us who are Christians. He has sought us out and gathered us in. It's a reminder that the real truths of Christianity are always even better than we first think.

It's a great example of this because it's easy to think that if you become a Christian, then something as amazing has happened. You think to yourself, I've found Jesus.

And you think, it's amazing. My life has been transformed because I've found Jesus. I've found peace and hope through finding Jesus. And of course, that's true to an extent, but the real truth is even better.

[28 : 17] You think to yourself, oh, it's so good that I've come and found Jesus. The real truth is that he came to find you.

And that's because he has loved you long, long, long before you ever even knew about him.

Your shepherd king has been looking for you since forever. And Jesus protects the flock from danger.

So as shepherd king, Jesus is gentle enough to help the most fragile land. But he's also strong enough to kill the fiercest predator and make no mistake.

God's flock faces a major predator. The devil and all the power of darkness want to destroy humanity. Sin is an utterly vicious enemy, a violent predator, a colossal threat to our safety.

[29 : 18] And we are like lambs ready for slaughter in the face of that. You think of all the power of sin. We are like lambs ready for slaughter, lambs before the wolves in the face of sin, which of course is why sin finds it very easy to wreck people's lives.

We see it all around us. We face this massive threat, but the shepherd king wants to stand between you and any predator.

And he is strong enough and he is brave enough and he is so protective of you that he will never, ever let you be snatched away.

And that's why if you put your trust in Jesus Christ, you have a shepherd king who is the bravest, strongest, wisest, mightiest, most heroic, most fearless, most resilient king of all.

And he is going to use all of those attributes to keep you safe and to make sure that you are okay.

[30 : 29] Jesus has all the qualities of the perfect shepherd king. And of course, all of these shepherding qualities are exercised because the flock is vulnerable.

God is sending the perfect shepherd king because we desperately need a perfect shepherd king. It's a great reminder that we don't come to Jesus because we're strong or sorted or together or doing well.

We come to Jesus because we're vulnerable and we need him. Jesus is the perfect king. He came to rule his people. All that the Old Testament was looking for in a ruler is found in Jesus.

But what about the other great theme that we had in the Old Testament? The link between the shepherd and sacrificial worship.

Well, the Old Testament was waiting for a perfect ruler, a perfect king. Jesus says, I'll do it. The Old Testament was also waiting for a perfect sacrifice.

[31 : 43] Jesus says, I'll do it. And that's why he says, I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Both of these find their fulfillment in Jesus. He is the perfect shepherd king. And he is also the perfect lamb who was slain.

And all of this shepherd imagery in the Bible is pointing us to the fact that Jesus is everything, absolutely everything that we need. We need a perfect king to shepherd us and guide us.

We need a perfect lamb to die for us. Jesus does it all. And this is brought out for us in a couple of verses in the New Testament that I want to show you.

One from Hebrews, one from Revelation, Hebrews 13.20 says, Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant.

[32 : 55] Jesus is the great shepherd and a key part of his role is to shed his own blood. Because by dying, he brought us into his flock, by dying, he rescued us from danger, by dying, he shows us where we need to go.

By dying, he gives us absolutely everything that we need. By dying, he becomes the perfect shepherd, which is why Revelation speaks about a vision of the throne of heaven where it says the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd.

The shepherd and the lamb are the same person. Jesus does everything that we need and because of that, he will guide us to springs of living water and wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Jesus is the lamb who was sacrificed and because of that death, he can shepherd you home forever.

And all of that means that when we say that Jesus is the shepherd king, we don't mean that he is a nice, woolly leader.

[34 : 19] We mean that he is everything that you need and everything that this world has ever needed. We mean that he is wise enough to lead you through everything.

He is gracious enough to provide for you more than you could ever begin to imagine. He is gentle enough to heal you, no matter how broken you are, no matter how fragile you are, he is gentle enough to heal you.

He is strong enough to rescue you and deliver you, no matter how much of a grip sin has on you, Jesus is strong enough to snatch you back and he is brave enough, brave enough to die for you.

He is everything that we need. And this is where we all need to really think about the claims of the Christian gospel because this is where all of history and all of life and death and eternity find their answers.

And I think we also need to just think about what we are really like. So here's my last question for you.

[35 : 43] What kind of animal are you? And if you ask the world that question, what kind of animal are you, you'd think, well, we'd probably choose something like a lion, strong and brave, or an eagle, free and fearless, or maybe like a racehorse, focused, capable, determined.

That's the kind of animals that we get kind of tattooed onto us and stuff like that. But if I am really honest, I'm not that brave or strong.

I'm not free and I'm not fearless. And I'm not that focused or capable either because I muck up in my life more than I succeed.

And if I look at a sheep, I see an animal that often doesn't pay attention to where it's going. It often does the same stupid things again and again. It often fails to learn lessons from past mistakes.

And it's not strong enough to stand up to all the trouble and trial that life will bring. And if I can bring myself to lay aside my pride for a moment, I will recognize the truth.

[36 : 58] That I'm not an eagle or a lion or a racehorse. Really I'm like a sheep.

And that's why I really, really, really need a shepherd. What about you? Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the perfect shepherd.

The perfect shepherd king who leads and guides us, who protects us, who nourishes us, who restores us. And you also laid down your own life as the perfect shepherd, the perfect sacrifice so that the shepherd became the lamb.

And we just want to thank you so much. And we want to acknowledge that we need you more than anything. And we want to live today, tomorrow, this week, and every week of our lives as people who follow you, our perfect shepherd king.

[38 : 18] Amen.