

I Myself Will Be the Shepherd

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 December 2007

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] Please be seated. You may like to turn to the Bibles in the pews to page 702 to the Old Testament reading from the prophet Ezekiel.

And let's pray as we come to God's word. God our Father you've caused all Holy Scripture to be written to make us wise for salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ and to equip us for every good work.

We pray today that you will fulfill that purpose for your scriptures in our hearts and lives so that we may bring glory and honor to you and to your son Jesus Christ. Amen.

As most of you know just recently I've been leading a group in Israel and some from this church have been part of that group. One of the things that astonishes me is how fixated people are at taking photographs.

And so with digital cameras and the no need to buy film some people seem to take a photograph of every stone and every rock and everything imaginable.

[1 : 0 4] And thousands and thousands I reckon some people on the trip took several thousand photographs. One of the most popular things to take a photograph of was a flock of sheep with a shepherd.

And so people were always on the lookout for sheep and shepherd. I mean we have sheep here. I suppose we have some shepherds in Australia. But they were very very excited about finding sheep and shepherd in Israel.

And on the last day as we left Israel and drove back through Jordan to Amman Airport. There was one woman who had yet to get her photograph of sheep with a shepherd. So those of us at the front of the bus were under strict instructions to call out in plenty of time that coming up on the left or the right there were sheep with a shepherd.

So that she sitting a little bit further back in the bus would get her photograph. Well I think she did get her photograph in the end. I guess in a dry country like Israel and largely without fences the sheep need shepherds.

They can't just sort of be in a wide pen or field or paddock as they would be here. So they do tend to have shepherds that would look after them, guide them, protect them, keep them off the roads and all that sort of thing.

[2 : 1 7] And it goes without saying that the task of a shepherd is to feed sheep, to lead them to pasture, to protect them and to guide them back to safety I guess at night.

And most here if not all would know that periodically through the scriptures the image of sheep and shepherd is used to describe the people of God and the leaders humanly speaking of God's people.

It's not strictly just a biblical image although we're so familiar with it from Psalm 23 and other places. But it's there in other ancient Near Eastern cultures as well. In a sense it's an obvious image that in a country that is agricultural having a sense of people being like sheep and leaders being like shepherds is an obvious thing in a sense.

And we find it time and again through the Bible. It may be not coincidental therefore that the great king of Israel, David the second king, was before becoming king a shepherd boy looking after sheep.

It may not therefore be coincidental that the same David who wrote Psalm 23 spoke about the Lord is my shepherd therefore shall I lack nothing.

[3 : 31] David was after all a king after God's own heart. Well 400 years after the heyday of Israel in a sense under David and subsequently under his son Solomon, Israel's plight was very different indeed.

The united nation of 12 tribes that David had ruled was no more. The northern section, the majority of tribes had been broken away and defeated in 721 BC by the Assyrians and in effect gone from history more or less.

And then in 586, the southern kingdom around what had been in his latter years David's capital Jerusalem had also been destroyed, this time by the Babylonians.

And the leaders and the wealthy of the nation largely had been taken away into exile far away, many hundreds of kilometres to Babylon, which is in modern day Iraq.

The king was in exile, the nation was in exile, the nation was no more. It was a demoralised province of the Babylonian empire. The temple had gone, the city had been destroyed completely.

[4 : 47] And in exile, far away from the promised land, in Babylon, God raised up a priest to be a prophet to the people, Ezekiel by name.

And there, this prophet priest, Ezekiel, was given words of prophecy during the time of exile. Early on, leading before the city of Jerusalem was destroyed and then beyond.

Most of the words of this book are words of judgment that explain why the exile has happened and bring God's judgment or condemnation really against the people for various sins, most notably idolatry, the worship of other gods and their apostasy in turning away from worshipping the true God.

The book changes a little bit from chapter 33, the chapter preceding today's chapter. And from then on, words of hope become a little bit more dominant.

But having said that, chapter 34, today's chapter, begins with severe words of judgment directed especially against the leaders of God's people.

[5 : 59] And the image of the shepherd and sheep predominates through this chapter, chapter 34. Here again these words of judgment and somewhat condemnation against God's leaders of his people in verses 2 to 4.

You 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 fatlings. But you do not feed the sheep. You've not strengthened the weak. You've not healed the sick. You've not bound up the injured.

You've not brought back the strayed. You've not sought the lost. But with force and harshness you have ruled them. Well, Ezekiel is not addressing shepherds of real sheep.

He's addressing the kings, the leaders, the priests, the judges, the bureaucracy that is around the king. And has been for some lengthy period of time.

[7 : 08] Basically, the accusation is that they have served themselves rather than serving the people and serving God. Instead of feeding the sheep, they're fleecing the sheep.

They're living lavish lives at the expense of the poor and the general populace of the people. The same sort of accusations. That is of the wealthy becoming wealthier at the expense of the poor.

We find in the prophet Amos, in Isaiah as well, and so on. And we find similar words from time to time in the descriptions of the kings in the book of Kings, 1 and 2 Kings.

Where the kings have not actually fed and taught the people. Feeding the sheep here is not just about giving them physical food to eat. It's about feeding them God's word.

And guiding them in God's pathways. And leading them in the pathways of trust and obedience. But they've failed. They've led people astray. They've not fed the sheep. Think, for example, of the time of Naboth's vineyard at the end of 1 Kings.

[8 : 11] Where Ahaz wanted that vineyard and coveted it. And led to a sham trial that led to Naboth's death. And him acquiring his field. Well, that's exactly the sort of thing that had been going on for centuries.

That Ezekiel is castigating the leaders for in this chapter here in Ezekiel 34. As a result of that, verses 5 and 6 say, Ezekiel 34.

The people, the sheep, were scattered. Because there was no shepherd. And scattered they became food for all the wild animals. Continuing the metaphor, they've become plunder in effect for the other nations like Babylon.

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 no one to search or seek for them.

Ezekiel's words are doing two things. He's exercising God's word of woe and punishment or judgment against the leaders for their sins. And secondly, he's showing how that is a contributing factor to the exile.

[9 : 21] Why now the nation has been exiled to Babylon. These words against the leaders lead in perhaps two directions of application.

I think the minor one is at the level of leadership of nations in general. These are the leaders of the nation of Israel. And I'm sure that God is appalled when the leadership of any nation behaves so abominably that they serve themselves, live lavish lives when all around them is poverty and people oppressed.

I'm sure that God is appalled at the way that Robert Mugabe rules Zimbabwe or the military junta in Burma, for example, and numerous other cases today and in history.

Leadership is an issue that's taken very seriously in the scriptures, both Old and New Testament. And God deplores any leadership of any nation that is self-serving rather than serving people.

But especially we must remember that these are words about the leaders of God's people. And the primary application leads us not so much to political leadership, but to the leadership of God's people today, which is church leadership.

[10 : 45] Speaking of bishops and pastors and preachers and lay leaders and elders and deacons and vestry members and church wardens and Bible study leaders and so on. Looking after God's flock is a very high responsibility indeed, both in the Old and the New Testaments.

For the image of the leaders of God's people in the church as shepherds over sheep is one that we find a few times still in the New Testament. So when Paul addresses the elders of the church of Ephesus, for example, in Acts 20, when Peter writes his first letter in 1 Peter 5, etc.

And the same analogy is used with the same sense of seriousness for the leaders of God's people. The same high degree of accountability is there for the leaders of the church, as we find implied here in Ezekiel chapter 34.

So when pastors live lavish lives at the expense of their people, when they get overpaid and live indulgently, then something is seriously wrong in the church of God.

When preachers fail to feed God's people with the word of God that we are to live on, then something is seriously wrong with the church of God. When ministers are full of their self-importance and want to sort of sit in the high seats with elaborate adornments and robes and so on, as though they're particularly important, then something is seriously wrong in the leadership of the people of God.

[12 : 23] And sadly, Christian leadership is all too often like the leadership that is being chastised here in Ezekiel 34, when the people of God are not being fed and not being protected from the wolves that seek to devour, from the false doctrines and heresies and immorality that is around.

Then these are words that so often have been ignored, it seems, in Christian leadership. Well, Ezekiel issues God's judgment against these leaders.

And to show how serious and significant these sins are, he repeats in summary form in verse 8 what he's already said back in verses 2 to 4.

He's about to apply these words, but with words of judgment. Therefore, verse 7 says, hear the word of God. But then to underscore the seriousness, he summarizes again what he said.

Because my sheep have become a prey and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, 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.

[13 : 30] Just to make it clear. Therefore, he comes back to the therefore in verse 9. You shepherds hear the word of the Lord, not just Ezekiel's word, but God's word through the prophet Ezekiel.

I am against the shepherds, verse 10 says, and I will demand my sheep at their hand. That level of accountability always applies for the leaders of God's people through history.

So that on the day of judgment, when each one of us is called to give account for our own lives before God, those who've led part of God's flock in any sort of leadership capacity, have an added accountability for the people who've been under their care.

So on the final day when Jesus judges the living and the dead, I, as a leader of Christian people, will be accountable not only for the way I've lived my life, but for whether or not I've cared for, fed, protected, guided the flock of God under my charge.

And for those of you in some leadership role, in some capacity of God's people, the same level of accountability will be applied also to you. But God says, No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves.

[14 : 49] I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. They're God's words of judgment against the leaders of God's people in the 6th century BC.

What follows is an extraordinary promise. We've heard these words of judgment, but now God is going to correct it. And we might expect God simply to say, I'm going to send now a good shepherd who will lead them, some person.

But actually the emphasis is more profound than that, much deeper, much more direct in fact. See how the emphasis is that God himself will shepherd his people.

See how that emphasis is portrayed with the simple word I. I will do this in verses 11 onwards. I myself will search for my sheep, and I will seek them out.

As shepherds seek out their flocks when they're among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they've been scattered.

[16 : 04] Verse 13, I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land, and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel. And in verse 14, I will feed them with good pasture.

In verse 15, I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, I will bring back the strayed, I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.

But the fat and the strong, I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. Now, of course, by this time, people would have been familiar with Psalm 23, for example, the Lord is my shepherd, therefore shall I like nothing.

But these words about God himself being the shepherd are a little stronger even, perhaps, than Psalm 23 could be read.

For it's really saying not simply that God will just send somebody to do the job that these other leaders have failed to do, but that God himself will directly come and do it.

[17 : 13] It's hard to know exactly how an original hearer in Babylon would have understood these words. But they are quite strong in the sense that God will come and do it himself.

Not just by another person, but that God himself will do what the leaders of God's people have failed to do.

It's hard to know what the original hearers would have expected, how they might have seen this being fulfilled. But for those of us who live after the time of Jesus, we see how extraordinarily this has been fulfilled in that God himself has come as a human being.

Not just that he's raised up a king or a prophet or a priest or somebody a bit better to do the job, but that God himself has entered this world to do exactly what Ezekiel said he would come to do.

I will come to rescue my people. The language of those verses I've just read, verses 11 to 16, so clearly point to the activity of Jesus' life on earth.

[18 : 25] He came to heal the sick and to bind up the injured and care for the weak in a sense. We see that in many of his miracles and his words of compassion. He came to seek and save the lost.

He said that explicitly when he, after dealing with Zacchaeus in Luke 19, for example, he came to rescue his sheep. So Jesus said, I've come as a ransom for many, for example.

The sense of ransom and rescue are interrelated sorts of ideas. And of course, it all points to him rescuing by dying on a cross.

That's where the rescuing and saving ideas find their climax. He was the one who came not to be served, like these leaders who lived lavish lives at the expense of their flock, but to serve by giving his life as a ransom for many.

He came to feed by his word, to teach them God's word and feed them from that word. Unlike the failed leaders of Old Testament times. Of course, even the best of human leaders fail.

[19 : 32] And David, who's often lifted up as the great leader of God's people in the Old Testament, a man after God's own heart, failed terribly with both adultery, implicit in murder, as well as in other ways, like orchestrating a census at the end of his life that God condemned him for, in a sense, or at least punished him for.

But God does what we're unable to do ourselves. He rescues, because no human can rescue us. No mere human can rescue us.

And we cannot rescue ourselves. But another dimension now comes to this prophecy and promise of the future from Ezekiel's words.

Not simply will God himself come to gather and heal and bind up in a very gentle and loving image, but the same God will come as judge.

Fits together, but it's an aspect that's often overlooked, not least at Christmas, where we tend to think of the sort of warm, innocent, cuddly baby sort of Jesus coming, and it's all nice and sweet.

[20 : 44] But the same Jesus who comes to heal and rescue is the same Jesus who comes to judge. So in verse 17, as for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats.

Is it not good? And is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet, the rest of your pasture. Again, he's condemning the leaders, but the leaders belong within the people of God.

So the promise that God will come and gather together all the flock of God does not mean that the, the leaders who've been guilty will get away with this scot free. They're the ones who fed on the, the ground and the pasture, but have actually left in a sense trampled down bits for the rest of the people.

Verse 18 ends. When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? That's using metaphorical language or picture language, but it's saying in effect, the, the leaders have enjoyed the best of the water and they've left sort of polluted water for the rest of the people to live on.

Well, they will be judged. Must my sheep eat what you've trodden with your feet and drink what you fouled with your feet. Verse 19. Therefore, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

[22 : 09] But as this is a judgment of justice, it's not an arbitrary judgment. It's not as though God's going to have a great flock of sheep and he's going to arbitrarily sort of send one lot to the right place and one lot to the wrong place.

No, his judgment will be careful. He'll judge between the fat and the lean, the, the leaders who've, who've lived it up at the expense of others. And those have been oppressed by the leaders.

There'll be a fair justice and judgment exercised by God himself. Verse 21. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder and buttered at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide.

Again, he's using picture language. He's not talking literally about, about animals, butting horns with other animals, but rather the leaders are like bullies and they've kicked out all the others, scattered them far and wide.

God will bring judgment against those bullies. Verse 22. The rulers have ravaged God's people and they will be held accountable before God and God will judge between them and those whom they have ravaged.

[23 : 29] The same God who will come personally to rescue the flock is the same God who will judge between the ravages and the ravaged.

Sometimes at Christmas we forget that the Lord Jesus who came to save is the same Lord Jesus who comes to judge.

The prophecy has another dimension again in the next section. We might misunderstand this and think that God is somehow stepping back from this promise.

In Australian political language, we might say, is God backing away from something because it's not a core promise. He says in verse 23, I'll set up over them one shepherd, my servant, David.

And we might think, well, God's just said that he will come and shepherd and, and now it's just David referring back to that great King in the earlier Old Testament times. Is God backing away from this and merely sending a person to do the job?

[24 : 40] But for us, of course, we realize just how profoundly these, these two things actually do fit together. I suspect for, for readers of Ezekiel, they, they would have had little comprehension or expectation of what we call the incarnation, God becoming flesh and himself living as a human being.

They probably just thought this passage was saying, well, God will raise up a good ruler like David had been a good one. But for us, we realize just how carefully and in what detail God fulfills every aspect of this promise.

That God himself does come and has come as the incarnate Jesus Christ, who himself is descended from David and is the son of David and hailed as such on earth in various cases and times.

God's not backing off from the promise. He's saying it in a different way. But my servant David, who is coming verse 23 is himself. God, who is coming from the earlier verses, fully human and fully divine.

God's not backing away. This David who is coming 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, not, not actually king.

[25 : 58] It's a word for prince because it's directing attention to the fact that God actually is the king. And that all those human kings of Old Testament history, the good and the bad, have merely, really been princes under God's kingship.

Although so many of them have in effect sought to usurp God's kingship. One of the issues of the very first king saw back in 1 Samuel 8 to 12, 8 to 15.

God himself will come fully human, fully divine, descended from David. We know that because we see how perfectly this promise has been fulfilled in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth.

When God called David to be king, back in the second book of Samuel, he made a covenant with David and had made earlier and reinforced a covenant with God's people as a whole.

But now we read in verse 25, another covenant, I will make with them a covenant of peace. And the description of this covenant that follows includes blessing on the land, raining down showers in their season in verse 26, trees yielding fruit in verse 27, the earth yielding its increase, security in the land.

[27 : 23] For those in Babylon, this was a beautiful promise. It evokes memories of the promised land that we read, say, in the book of Deuteronomy, of a land where there'll be rain and crops and abundance and increase, and showers of blessing as well.

No more plunder for the nations, verse 28, and there'll be safety at the end of verse 28. Splendid vegetation, verse 29. So no more hunger and no more suffering the insults of other nations.

At the heart of the covenant in the Old Testament is often the summary statement, I will be their God and they will be my people. We find it again here.

The end of verse 20, or in the middle of verse 27, they shall know that I am the Lord. And then expressed in verse 30, they shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people.

And then returning to the sheep imagery, verse 31, that relationship is expressed, you are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God. There's the Old Testament covenant in a nutshell.

[28 : 41] I am their God and they are my people and we all know it. And that's in effect the essence of the Old Covenant. But now, we find verse 25 promising that same relationship in a new covenant.

I guess for the people who heard these words from Ezekiel, those who are by the river Sheba in Babylon, as Psalm 137 expresses, how can we worship the Lord in a strange land?

Those who are dispirited by their exile may be giving up on God. Maybe these were words of great comfort in fact, that somehow there will be a restoration to the promised land and its blessing.

But these words are fulfilled when the Lord Jesus comes, both coming to rescue and coming to judge. They have a bigger fulfillment than simply the return of the people from exile in Babylon to the land of Israel.

Ultimately, the greater reality is in fact heaven. That is the place of perfect safety, security, blessing and provision and joy.

[29 : 55] And that is the place where there is a perfect relationship between God and God's people. So often people get led astray or misunderstand these sorts of Old Testament promises and seem to apply them simply to the geographical land.

But when we read the Old Testament story through, though a few years after these words of Ezekiel, a couple of decades or a few decades perhaps, later that 6th century, the people come back to the land.

But these words are not fulfilled. There isn't really safety and blessing. They're merely an outpost of the Persian Empire then and later the Greek, later under Roman occupation.

There's no king. There is another temple that's built. But the people don't see the joy and blessing that this passage and others seem to predict. And so sometimes people get very excited that since 1948, for example, the nation of Israel has been there and that somehow these Old Testament prophecies are somehow being fulfilled there.

When we were in Israel, we visited the very north of the land, Tel Dan, the Old Testament city of Dan. From this city, you can look over a little river and there is Lebanon, the country to the north.

[31 : 10] And while we were there at Tel Dan, there was a group of, I assume, American Christians praying fervently, well, at least loudly, with hands upraised and often fists clenched, facing Lebanon, shouting in a loud voice, I guess because they wanted God to hear and assumed he was in America.

Sorry, that's a bit, that's probably a bit too cynical. But it was hard not to think that, to be honest. And the content of their prayers was largely this, could be summarised in these words, God, you've blessed us because we bless Israel.

I must say, it pained me to hear that. It angered me somewhat and I was very tempted to go and interrupt them to teach them some Old Testament hermeneutics, but I didn't. Probably to the relief of the rest of my group.

But it seems to me that the New Testament directs us to a better, deeper fulfilment, the one that should actually give us even more excitement. That is, it's directing us to heaven.

For these words about God personally coming, we see at one level fulfilled at Christmas when Jesus is born as fully divine and fully human. But these words are telling us that Jesus will come to judge.

[32 : 20] And though in his first coming there were words of judgment and woe against the leaders of Jesus' day, there was the very clear promise that Jesus is yet to come and he's coming in the future as the judge and will bring in in fullness and perfection the kingdom of God, which is what this covenant of peace is looking forward to.

For it's on that day that we'll find the perfection that Jesus promises and the Old Testament promises and it's on that day that there'll be the separation of sheep and goats and judgment and it's on that day that we'll be brought into a perfect relationship with God.

And the difference of this covenant with the old one is not in a sense in content so much as in the power of this new covenant to make us the people that we really should be that the old covenant doesn't have the power to do.

This covenant of peace, this promise of blessing is directing us to a greater reality than an earthly place and that is a heavenly reality.

It's not a made up fiction to think of heaven. It's actually more real than earth. It will last much longer than earth and this is directing us to the total fulfillment on the day of the Lord Jesus' return.

[33 : 29] It's not about a modern state of Israel that is both secular and actually persecutes Christians in its boundaries. How can God see that as a great thing of joy and fulfillment? It's not when the name of Jesus is so often despised in that place.

This is directing us to the place where the name of Jesus will be lifted up and honored by all in their words and in their hearts. And so it's directing us to see that the first coming of Jesus that so remarkably fulfills this prophecy will give us indeed added confidence that the Lord Jesus is returning as promised as judge of the living and the dead and that these promises will be even more remarkably fulfilled for eternity and for the glory of God.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem God was bringing about an extraordinary fulfillment of these long prophecies and there are others in the Old Testament.

that Jesus' first coming fulfills. Don't fail to underestimate his task of coming to rescue and save the lost. And don't underestimate his task that he's coming again to judge the living and the dead.

He indeed is the good shepherd about whom I'll say more on Christmas morning. And it's no wonder then that gathered around the manger at that first Christmas were shepherds.

[34 : 58] not just because they happened to be sitting doing nothing on a mountainside nearby and an angel popped in but I suspect quite deliberately that shepherds were brought there because this is God the true shepherd.

The Lord who is the shepherd. The shepherds were worshipping the good shepherd. And as a result of Jesus' coming then and yet to come in the future the words of Psalm 23 even more than for David 3,000 years ago are fulfilled for us.

The Lord is my shepherd I shall therefore lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures He leads me beside still waters He restores my soul He leads me in right paths for His namesake and even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I 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 and my cup overflows surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long Amen Biggestellt of the Lord and another

Father and another Lord that and another You're giving me a human a hit of