

Shepherds, Good and Bad

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[0 : 00] O God, our Father, speak to us from your word tonight, we pray. Write it on our hearts that we may not only understand, but believe it, and live lives for the glory of your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

We are so used to it that we complain when it doesn't happen these days. That is, we are so used to instant news. Today, many of us have seen pictures of the Barack Obama inauguration.

Many of you may have even got up at half past three in the morning to watch it live. My cleaning lady did, and she came late today, and I was wondering why she was so late. But she'd been up since half past three watching the inauguration, and I'm sure many people did.

It's amazing that we can see live things as they happen. Within minutes of a plane crash landing in the Hudson River, we could see pictures of it all around the world.

It's astonishing, really. And this has been going on for so many years that we take it for granted. We could see man land on the moon live, I think. I'm not sure that I did see it live, but we watched it at school soon after the event, if I remember rightly.

[1 : 23] And we're so used to instant news that it's up on the screen almost as it happens, instantly being told. Yet, of course, it's not that many years, more than 50 years ago, when it took several days for the news of the Everest conquest to reach London.

I don't remember that, but some of you might. Well, in the 6th century BC, news took a long time to travel. And that's part of the background context of these words tonight in Ezekiel that we're looking at.

Ezekiel had predicted the fall of Jerusalem. The word from God had come to him, which he'd spoken. And that comes in chapter 24, at the beginning of chapter 24, in verses 1 and 2.

Ezekiel told by God, In the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, The word of the Lord came to me. Mortal, write down the name of this day, this very day.

The king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day. Now, what's striking about that, as I mentioned on Sunday night, is that other than God revealing that to Ezekiel, it would have been many weeks, if not months, before Ezekiel knew that the siege by Babylon of Jerusalem had begun.

[2 : 49] Because it's a fair distance, over and above the Arabian desert, to travel from Jerusalem to Babylon. But God had revealed exactly on the same day that the siege began, so that the people in exile, in Babylon, where Ezekiel is, would know that the siege has begun.

There's no other way that they would know that for several weeks or months, other than God revealing it to them. And what that does in the book of Ezekiel, as I mentioned also on Sunday night, is that it creates this sense of waiting and suspense.

The siege has begun. Sieges are painfully slow, tense, terrifying times. Another day gone. Another day gone.

Are we going to survive? Another day gone. And the way the book of Ezekiel works is that the order of the book has been deliberately arranged so that the middle chapters are oracles against other nations.

The only bit of the book that's not quite in chronological sequence. And so after the announcement of the siege beginning, we get chapters 25 to 32, on which I preach Sunday night.

[4 : 04] Oracles against seven different nations, gathered together from slightly different periods of time by Ezekiel. He spoke them. And what it does is as we read the book, it creates a sort of hiatus, a waiting time, a suspense-filled time.

But always in the back of our mind is to be Jerusalem is under siege. The siege began in January 587 BC, ten years before Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian general, had surrounded Jerusalem, had capitulated, and he took off the leaders, the King Jehoiachin, Ezekiel, amongst other priests and others, to exile.

And he placed there a puppet king, brother of Jehoiachin. But after some years, they rebelled against Babylon foolishly and stupidly. And so Nebuchadnezzar came back, angrier than ever, and this time besieged Jerusalem, determined to destroy the city down to its foundation.

For those in exile, the waiting about the siege will not only be the length of time of the siege, but will also be the additional wait for the news to come at the end of the siege, if you understand what I mean.

That is, God has spoken directly to the exiles and said the siege begins today. If he hadn't done that, news would have taken many weeks, if not several months, to get to them.

[5 : 26] But God doesn't reveal the news at the end. A messenger comes to do that. So the actual waiting period is longer than the siege, if you understand. The siege of Nebuchadnezzar took about 18 months before Jerusalem was destroyed.

The waiting period is about two years. During that time, we read those oracles of the nations and we, like the people in exile, are meant to be wondering, worried, puzzling, in suspense, waiting for the news about the siege.

And finally it comes, after chapters 25 to 32, dealing with the surrounding nations and with Egypt. In chapter 33, there's a recommissioning of Ezekiel to be the watchman, something we looked at a few weeks ago in chapter 3, but he's recommissioned for what really is a different role in many respects for the latter part of the book, from judgment to hope, the bridge being those oracles against the nations in the middle.

And then in chapter 33, verse 21, in the 12th year of our exile, in the 10th month, on the 5th day of the month, someone who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, the city has fallen.

He may have come alone. There may have been others with him. It's about six months after the end of the siege. This, if I remember rightly, from what I read, is about the 8th of January, 585 BC.

[7 : 05] We've just missed its anniversary, I guess. The city has fallen. We know from history, from the Old Testament, as well as non-Old Testament sources, that the siege of Jerusalem was terrible, that the Israelites caught in the siege, some of them resorted even to cannibalism.

Many, many died. The city was destroyed, the temple destroyed to its foundations, the main buildings destroyed, the walls pulled down, and Jerusalem was left desolate, a sort of ruin.

Admittedly, in the ruins of the temple, apparently some sacrifices at times later on were conducted, but by and large, people lived in the city, a fairly impoverished and despondent life for the years that followed.

It's terrible news for the people in exile. It's terrible news, not because it's their homeland only, but because the destruction of Jerusalem meant the destruction of the temple.

And all their hope pinned, in effect on God, was pinned on the temple. And when it was destroyed, it demolished their theological hope, their hope of a future.

[8 : 21] For those in exile, they tended to think the hope laid back in Jerusalem. Those in Jerusalem who were left behind ten years before, they all thought the temple will never fall. We see that reflected in Jeremiah chapter 7, for example.

But it fell. For seven and a half years, since his first call as a prophet, Ezekiel has been prophesying words almost totally of woe, of judgment, of the wrath of God, of punishment for their sins, for their idolatry, their iniquity, their brutality against each other.

They're turning their back on God. Some of those passages were seen in the last few weeks on Wednesday and Sunday nights. During all of that time, for seven and a half years, if you remember back at the end of chapter 3, in a most peculiar thing, God silences Ezekiel.

His tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. Hardly the thing you'd expect for a prophet who is meant to proclaim the oracles of God. And for seven and a half years, the only words that Ezekiel uttered out loud are those that are recorded in these chapters.

Chapters 3 to 32, I guess. And over a seven and a half year period, that's not many words. That is, the implication is he couldn't ask his wife, could you please pass the butter?

[9 : 48] He couldn't pray out loud to God for mercy. He couldn't say sweet nothings to his wife in bed at night. He couldn't chat socially to his neighbours, his fellow Israelite refugees.

The only things he could say were the words that God gave him. Very peculiar. But what God is doing is shaking a complacent people out of their complacency.

And the prophets, when they bring words of judgement, keep doing that. They use all sorts of shock tactics. And that was one of God's for Ezekiel. Not an easy life being a prophet.

But now what happens? Jerusalem's destroyed, the man says. The city has fallen. And all of a sudden, Ezekiel's tongue is loosened. So chapter 33, verse 22.

Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came. But he had opened my mouth by the time the fugitive came to me in the morning. So my mouth was opened and I was no longer unable to speak.

[10 : 52] That's the hinge of the book. The news of the fall of Jerusalem. Not actually the fall, that was a few months before, but news of the fall of Jerusalem.

And now his tongue is loosened. And in the most extraordinary movement in this book, we move now to words of hope, not judgment.

You'd think that after words of judgment and the fall of Jerusalem, you'd get words of even blacker judgment. Now the temple's gone. But actually, it's the reverse of what we might expect.

Now come, almost entirely, words of hope in the rest of this book. Now of course, people love messages of hope. We've seen that in the United States over the last year.

The extraordinary Obama mania pinning all sorts of exotic hope on a man whom we must be sympathetic for, I think, and certainly pray for. And those in Judah, people in general, they love positive words.

[11 : 59] They love words that will give them hope and optimism and the feel-good factor. It's a great trap for preachers around our world today because God's word is not always a feel-good factor.

God's word is not always a word of hope. There is always a word of judgment on the flip side of a word of hope as we see in Ezekiel. But because we need shock tactics to get through our hard hearts and stubborn minds, words of judgment often come with strangenesses and oddities like the tongue stuck to the mouth.

But because our ears itch for words of hope, it seems to me the odd things in the prophets wane a bit when we get to the easy words, the comforting words because ears will be open to them and now Ezekiel is free to speak.

But there is a distinction between false hope and true hope. In the next bit of chapter 33, the survivors back in Judah, the people who've not been taken off to exile again or a second time, those who haven't been killed by Nebuchadnezzar, who remain behind in a pretty demoralised place, there is still element of false hope there.

It's very blind hope, it's quite deaf hope in fact, to God's word. But in Ezekiel 33 verse 23, onwards, that paragraph, mortal the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel, they keep saying, Abraham was only one man yet he got possession of the land but we are many, the land is surely given to us to possess.

[13 : 40] How wrong and how stupid that is. Abraham did not possess the land though his descendants did and they've completely ignored God's warnings for centuries leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and they are blind in their sin.

They do not see that the destruction is because of their sin. Thus says the Lord God in verse 25, you eat flesh with the blood forbidden in Old Testament law, you lift up your eyes to your idols, something we saw in Ezekiel 8, you shed blood, committing murder that is, shall you then possess the land?

That is, they are breaking the basic commandments of God. They haven't realised that associated with the promises and judgement of God is a high standard of morality.

They're ignorant, blind in their sin. You depend on your swords, you commit abominations and each of you defiles his neighbour's wife.

Shall you then possess the land? And the question begs the answer, no. Even though they're in the land and haven't been taken to exile or killed, theirs is a false hope.

[14 : 58] Say this to them, thus says the Lord God, as I live, surely those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword and those who are in the open field I will give to the wild animals to be devoured and those who are in strongholds and in caves shall die by pestilence.

I will make the land a desolation and a waste and its proud might shall come to an end and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that no one will pass through. The language there is not new.

It's language that evokes memory of the curses of the covenant in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. then they shall know that I am the Lord when I have made the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations that they have committed.

It's a false hope that simply because they're in the land the future lies with them. They're unrepentant, blind and deaf in their sin. But then turning now to the exiles and this is the thing that is so surprising in this book that hope will come from Babylon, from the exiles in Babylon, not from those in the land where we might expect given all the history of Israel focused on the land in the hundreds of years before this.

So verse 30, as for you mortal, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to a neighbour, come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.

[16 : 29] Now you can imagine that Ezekiel would be a sort of prime exhibit of oddity for seven and a half years. The man who's so often dumb and silent, oh, he's suddenly speaking today, let's all rush and hear what his word is.

They come to you as people come, they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words but they will not obey them. Ezekiel is just a sort of oddity, some amusement or entertainment for them in exile.

For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain. to them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument.

They hear what you say, they will not do it. When this comes, and come it will, then they shall know that a prophet has been among them.

Ezekiel is warning Ezekiel that he will actually be popular. He might be strange in their eyes, but he will actually be popular. As Ezekiel speaks words of hope, they will be flattered.

[17 : 33] They will think this is wonderful. There are words of hope for us in exile. We are okay in God's eyes. Our lives are okay. We pass God's standard, which is not the word of hope that Ezekiel will speak, but it is what they will hear.

Flattering heads or flattering ears each to hear such words of hope. And you can imagine that while they are in exile and Ezekiel now speaks these words of hope, you can imagine all the side industries that will go on.

As people walk down by the Sheba River down the little path to Ezekiel's house, there will be the people at the front selling their t-shirts with an image of Ezekiel on the front. And they will have their badges with Ezekiel.

There will be Ezekiel mania. The newspapers will report on everything he says and does and what his wife is wearing and his two little girls, if he ever had any, probably didn't, what they be wearing and saying and doing as well.

But flattery and popularity is very beguiling. The exiles you see still do not turn to God. They might love Ezekiel's word of hope that's coming, but actually it's falling on deaf ears.

[18 : 37] It's entertainment value. Oh, I love to hear that preacher. I love his sweet and smooth words. They're so well put together and so on. But the heart is cold and the ears are actually deaf to God's word.

That's the warning to Ezekiel. Well, it's rather oddly a posit that we consider Ezekiel 34 today, it seems to me, a day for new leaders.

Well, that's his first word of hope in chapter 34. Ezekiel firstly lambasts the earlier leaders of Israel, denouncing Judah's kings, the bad shepherds.

Of course, in a dry country like Israel, largely without fences, sheep need shepherds to guide them. Several times I've taken trips to Israel and always people are wanting to take photos of shepherds in Israel, so much so that people are calling out in the bus.

There's one coming up on the right-hand side and everyone's getting their camera out ready. Oh, I didn't get that photo, I need another one. It goes without saying that shepherds' job in such an environment is to protect, to feed, guard, lead the sheep.

[19 : 54] It's a common analogy for the leaders of God's people. But it's not just a biblical one. It's a very common biblical analogy, but it was common in the ancient world. Hammurabi, for example, in Sumer and other ancient near eastern places, often used the image of a shepherd as the image of the leadership of the people of God.

Because maybe it was not coincidental that before he became the king after God's own heart, David was a shepherd. And it may not be coincidental that this same David, the shepherd king, wrote the most famous of Psalms, 23.

David was a king after God's own heart, but that was a rarity. And if you read the books of kings, one and two kings that follow on from David with his son Solomon and then the kingdom dividing into two, for 400 years of history up to the time of Ezekiel, it's a rare exception who is a king praised by the compiler of those books.

And even when they're praised, there is always a qualification. every king of the northern kingdom is condemned. There are eight exceptions in the south and all of them, even the great Josiah, didn't perfectly succeed.

He did these good things, but this didn't happen. For 400 years, Israel, Judah in the south, was largely ruled by bad kings.

[21 : 26] Ezekiel doesn't disagree at all with that. For example, King Manasseh, soon before Josiah in the previous century, had imported all sorts of idolatry into the temple.

Josiah had cleaned it out, but when Josiah died tragically young at the age of 39 in battle against Egypt in 609, all of it came back into the temple, and that's the vision of Ezekiel 8 that we saw a few weeks ago.

God's indictment then in Ezekiel are these words of chapter 34, verse 2 to 4. Mortal prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.

Prophesy and say to them, to the shepherds, thus says the Lord God, are 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.

[22 : 27] You've not strengthened the weak, you've not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

That's the indictment that God levels against the previous shepherds, the kings that is of Israel in the 400 years preceding. It's typical actually as a statement of much leadership in the world.

Leaders so often live lavishly at the expense of their people and the poor. Instead of feeding sheep they fleece them. They live in opulent palaces while their sheep live in squalid slums.

We see the same sort of accusation that we've just seen here in Amos, in Isaiah, as well as in 1 and 2 kings. The behaviour of Israel's leaders was a substantial cause of the exile.

So verses 5 and 6, First, the experience of Solomon, and he and on every high hill.

[23 : 47] My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth with no one to search or seek for them. The failure of the leaders, mind you, does not exonerate the people. Their plea before God is not, will our leaders let us astray, so blame them, not us.

Because if you remember the call of Ezekiel, people are still culpable for their own wrongdoing. But if the leader leads them astray, their blood is on the leader as well as on the people.

And that, in effect, is what Ezekiel is saying now about earlier leaders of the people of Judah and the people of Israel. But there remains a responsibility for the people of God themselves, but a greater one for the leaders of God's people.

Leadership, of course, is taken very seriously in the Bible. There are books and chapters devoted, in effect, to the leaders of God's people through the Old Testament, priests and prophets and judges and kings, for example.

Letters written about and to leaders in the New Testament, Timothy and Titus, for example, as well as substantial models of leadership amongst the apostles and not least Jesus. And without a doubt, even at the simple political level, we could readily say that God deplores bad leadership of people.

[25 : 07] God must hate what is happening in Zimbabwe, in Burma, where the generals and Mugabe are feeding themselves up big and fat while hundreds are dying in squalor.

But especially the context here is that this is not just any nation. It's the nation of God's own people. Judah, the remnant of Judah, the southern kingdom with its capital Jerusalem.

And so the equivalent is not so much the political leaders, although they stand under God's condemnation as well if they practice this. But the leaders of God's people today, church pastors and ministers, elders and deacons, Bible study leaders and Sunday school teachers, anyone to whom God has entrusted some part of his flock is a shepherd in God's eyes.

And feeding God's sheep is a high responsibility, something we should never take lightly at all, whatever our role as a shepherd in God's big flock.

Notice in those verses, and indeed all the way through to verse 10, five times God says, my sheep, my sheep. They're not the king's sheep. They're not the shepherd's sheep. Indeed, they're not the Christian pastor's sheep either.

[26 : 28] They are God's sheep, entrusted to a human under-shepherd. That's why Ezekiel's own role in chapter 33 and back in chapter 3 is so serious and important.

He in effect is acting like a shepherd. And Paul uses the same analogy of a shepherd being responsible and accountable before God for the sheep under his care in his famous speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20.

When pastors live lavish lives at the expense of their people, something is seriously wrong. When preachers fail to feed the flock of God with God's pure word, something is terribly wrong.

It's a great irony to me that one of the sort of Anglican liberal heretics in this country, not in this state, has the surname of Shepherd, the Dean of the Cathedral of Perth.

When ministers are full of self-importance and self-serving, something is seriously wrong. And sadly, Christian leadership has not often learned the lessons of Ezekiel 34.

[27 : 39] Well, Ezekiel, having given the indictment, or God, rather, having given the indictment through Ezekiel in verses 2 to 6, issues his verdict in verses 7 to 10 about these bad leaders. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord.

As I live, says the Lord God, that is, God is making this a solemn oath here. 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, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord.

Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand 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 so that they may not be food for them. The emphasis all through here is emphasizing again their sins, so it's repeating some of the sins of verses 2 to 6 for emphasis.

And verse 10 is bridging into the paragraph that follows. God himself will judge the false shepherds and himself will do what they should have done.

[29 : 08] Indeed, so perverse are these false shepherds that as verse 10 indicates, it's not just that they're not feeding the sheep, they're actually devouring the sheep themselves.

One Peter, or Peter when he writes his first letter, picks up surely on the background of this as he reflects on the nature of Christian leadership. That's why he says in 1 Peter chapter 5 at the beginning, Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend to the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you do it.

Not for sordid gain, but eagerly. Do not lord it over yourself, over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.

And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. The warnings that Peter has there, don't lord it over them, don't do it for sordid gain, are the very things that these false shepherds are doing here in Ezekiel.

Surely that is part of his background. It's a very weighty responsibility that is placed on the pastor or Bible teacher or Sunday school leader or Bible study group leader.

[30 : 40] We should not take it lightly if we are in that position. We should certainly pray for those who are. What follows though, in this context of the destruction of Jerusalem, of centuries of false leadership of the kings and leaders of God's people, is an audacious hope.

God himself will shepherd the people. God will do it himself because nobody else has done it properly. So he says in verse 11, For thus says the Lord God, I myself will search for my sheep and I will seek them out.

As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

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 by the watercourses and in all the inhabited parts of the land.

I will feed them with good pasture and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture. There they shall lie down in good grazing land and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

[32 : 03] 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 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 with justice to get the emphasis. I, I, I God is saying. I'll do it. They haven't done it.

I will do it. All the things they haven't done I will do. God himself will come. It fits with what we know in other parts of the Old Testament. The Lord is my shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd at the beginning of Psalm 23, for example. And there's resonance of that Psalm here about making them lie down in the green pasture and so on. God himself will come and do this is what God is saying to the exiles by the waters of Babylon.

God will be the shepherd. God will rescue them and gather them, protect them and feed them. God will nourish them and look after them. God will do that.

[33 : 14] What God is promising here is a restoration to his ideal from earlier in the Old Testament. The ideal of the people of God was certainly not a democracy, never. That should never be our God either.

Nor was it actually a monarchy. It was actually theocracy where God ruled and that's in effect what he's promising here. That he'll restore his own rule over his people.

It's hard to know what an original hero might have thought of this when God says, I will do it, I will do it. What would they be expecting? In similar passages in the Old Testament relating to this exilic period, Isaiah the prophet spoke of the Persian emperor being God's shepherd who will bring back the exiles from being scattered in Isaiah 44.

But of course in that famous passage of Isaiah chapter 40 as he looks forward to the end of the exile and to the return of the promised land after saying about making straight in the desert path for my God, he, God, will feed his flock like a shepherd.

He will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep. Isaiah 40 verse 11. But in case we get sidetracked by a sort of gentle view of or picture of God picking up a little cuddly lamb like a Collingwood Children's Farm advert or something like that, this same God who will come as the shepherd also judges.

[34 : 53] So verse 17, He's issuing words here again of condemnation of the false shepherds.

But it's making it clear that God's justice and mercy is grounded in a moral standard. He will judge.

Salvation and judgment flowing together through this passage. the salvation of some implies the judgment of others and vice versa.

That is, there is not only mercy but justice in God's promised hope. And remember, this is hope not for those in Jerusalem in the land but for those by the waters of Babylon.

But then comes another dimension to this promise of God. He said, I will come and I will do this and I will be the shepherd and I will rescue and I will save and I will heal and I will feed and so on. But then verse 23, I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them and he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

[36 : 12] And I, the Lord, will be their God and my servant David shall be prince among them. I, the Lord, have spoken. Why David? Not just because he was a shepherd but because he was the great king, the archetypal king, a failure in many ways, an adulterer and a murderer.

Not perfect but a king after God's own heart. Notice the emphasis there on feeding. Instead of devouring and fleecing the sheep, they will be fed.

And the image of course is feeding them physical food but in the spiritual life it's much more than simply physical food. It's nourishing them with God's word for that's how one lives.

It's one shepherd, that's the emphasis in verse 23 because for 300 or so years the kingdom has been divided. The northern kingdom has been destroyed for 140, the northern kingdom of Israel centered on Samaria but the people of God have been divided.

We'll see in Ezekiel chapter 37 the bringing together of what was the north with the remnant of the south and here is the same suggestion. There will be one shepherd over all of the people. There will be unity finally of the people of God.

[37 : 23] He's called my servant not because he's going to lord it over them but he'll serve under God's leadership as the kings have not done. Picks up the language of course of Isaiah 40 to 55 which prophesies the servant who lay down his life for the sins of many.

And notice that David is called in verse 24 a prince. We might think that's a bit of a demotion for a person like King David but prince because it makes it very clear God is the king.

The reason why of course this promise is hinging on David is not simply that he was a great king but to him in 2 Samuel 7 God made the promise of an everlasting dynasty in the line of David.

A promise that God has kept to this very day in Ezekiel. The northern kingdom had broken away and none of their kings were descended from David and that kingdom ended. But every one of the kings of Judah with a brief interlude exception when a queen mother stole the throne was descended from David.

Even King Jehoiachin in exile with Ezekiel descended from David. David. That's why David becomes the basis of so much hope for a king to come.

[38 : 50] The result of this, verse 25, is a covenant of peace. Shalom. This covenant of peace will reflect that wild animals are banished.

Something we might find a little bit peculiar but in the ancient world wild animals were real threats and in some parts of our world they remain so. They'll be gone.

No fear of them. There'll be safety and security. Verse 26, I will make them in the region around my hill a blessing. I'll send down the showers in their season. They shall be showers of blessing.

The trees of the field shall yield their fruit and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil. They shall know that I am the Lord when I break the bars of their yoke and save them from the hands of those who enslave them.

They shall no more be plunder for the nations nor shall the animals of the land devour them. They shall live in safety and no one shall make them afraid. I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land and no longer suffer the insults of the nations.

[40 : 00] 2 Samuel 7 was the old covenant with David. This is like a new Davidic covenant. covenant of peace. Do you recognise the language?

Ezekiel's hearers should have. I expect Ezekiel himself probably did being trained to be a priest. It's the language of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

It's the language of covenant blessing. It's the language of what God will bring about when his people follow him. that's implicit therefore in what's said here.

This is not just a blanket promise to all and every regardless of what they do but it's tied back to the covenant blessings of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Blessings of fertility, security, of victory over enemies.

It's all there and the language comes from those books. an end of fear, a place of bliss, something that didn't happen when the exile ended geographically in the Old Testament of course.

[41 : 09] All the things that Judah sought politically, safety and security and political alliance with Egypt and others, came to naught. Real safety and security comes from the promises of God.

But notice too this is not human centric. This is not a picture of bliss where we're all sitting back in our lounge chairs in a sort of great big Gold Coast resort or something awful like that.

This is not a human centred leisure theme park. At the heart of it is a relationship with God. Verse 27 in the middle of that passage about the covenant of peace, they shall know that I am the Lord.

And at the end verse 30 and 31 they shall know that I the Lord their God am with them and that they the house of Israel are my people says the Lord God. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God says the Lord God.

That is at the heart of what makes for peace, at the heart of this covenant of peace, at the heart of the audacious hope of God is a relationship with God for his people, his faithful obedient people.

[42 : 30] This is a theocentric vision of hope, not a human centred one. And at heart is a relationship with God, just like we see in the book of Revelation, with the centre of heaven being the throne of God.

But did you notice there the refrain, that they may know that I am their God. The refrain that we saw on Sunday night all through the oracles to the nations. And in the middle of those oracles, if you remember in chapter 28 at the end, to Israel as well.

I am God. But what God is on about is not simply the comfort and ease and rescue of his people Israel for their sake. God is actually on about saving the world through his people Israel.

And his act of judgment on Israel and his act of rescue of Israel is for the sake of the world that the world will know that God is God and that the world will come to its knees and acknowledge that Yahweh the God of Israel is their God and is the world's God.

That's what God's desire and aim is. It's not a human-centered, people-centered, Israel-centered, Christian-centered aim. It is a thoroughly God-centered, God-glorifying aim that the world will know that he is God.

[44 : 01] For a people exiled in Babylon, refugee camp by the Chiba Canal, a tributary of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, these would be words of enormous comfort, surprising comfort, outrageous comfort to think that somehow they, that motley group, already exiled for 10 or 11 years, is the nucleus of the hope of all the promises of God.

And it doesn't belong to those left in Judah. Land, security, blessing, protection, fertility, fulfillment, being fed and nourished, all the things they don't have in exile.

God assures them, we'll be theirs for the future. The future when? These words of 585 BC, no doubt, rang in the memories for a few decades.

In 538, nearly 50 years later, some of these folk may just have still been alive in old age. God's shepherd Cyrus, the Persian emperor, conquered Babylon and within a year issued a decree to allow all conquered peoples to return to their homeland.

By that stage, though, many Israelites were well settled and never went back. Some did, but they were pretty dispirited mostly.

[45 : 33] Though they started to build the temple, they only did a bit of foundation work and gave up. They needed later prophets to cajole them and persuade them to resume the building of the temple.

These words of hope seemed to have been lost a little in their corporate memory. And certainly they were not fulfilled. The covenant of peace and fertility and prosperity and blessing and so on wasn't realised after Jews went back in 538.

or in later groups going back over the century to follow. And in fact in all of the rest of the 500 years before Jesus never fulfilled. No Davidic king for a start.

Possibly the governors of Babylonia maybe was a descendant of David. There's debate about that but the Old Testament makes little of that. There's certainly no Davidic king. It was merely a Persian outpost, a province beyond the river.

And then after 333 a Greek province when Alexander the Great defeated Persia. And then after the 60s BC a Roman province as we know much better from New Testament days.

[46 : 44] And though in later Old Testament times some claims the title of king they were not Davidic descendants Herod for example and others are these words of prophecy that come to nothing their fulfillment lost somehow God gave up even on these words of hope we know that's not the case Ezekiel is promising not simply another king not simply a continuation of the past but with a slightly better king or president or something like that that God himself will come that his servant David will come hard to imagine how you would conceive of that being fulfilled before the event and how surprised we are after the event at the astonishing way in which both God coming and a servant of

God descended from David comes and they are one and the same fulfilled in the incarnation of the man descended from David and born in David's town but God incarnate God with God with us as promised here and as said in Matthew 1 for example fulfillment in the most profound and astonishing way fulfillment in God's time not in human time Jesus of course is the fulfillment of God coming as the shepherd and of the promise of David to come as the shepherd so no wonder the New Testament and the Gospels in particular reek of shepherd language not just because a shepherd was a typical site on a Judean hillside but because of all this background and context of the shepherd who would come I am the good shepherd he said provocative words when there are herods around and think of the words at

Jesus conception in the song and the announcement of him to come and in Mary's song for example he was the announcement comes to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph to the house of David Davidic descent and then a bit later on he will be great he'll be called the son of the most high and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David he'll reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end what an astonishing claim to make before he's born Mary's song makes it clear as well and no wonder that those who gathered at his manger included shepherds as they praised the good shepherd who came to seek and save the lost we're told in Luke 19 the very language out of this passage he came to rescue to die and to serve again evoking the language out of this passage and other Old Testament parts as well he came to heal and to care for the weak he came not to be served but to serve lay down his life for the sheep of course he came to judge which again is fulfillment of this expectation and this hope to separate the sheep from the goats and so on the final day for dispirited refugees by the waters of

Babylon this passage is outrageous in its audacity of hope a people who will be gathered and as we'll see in chapter 36 on Sunday night transformed in their hearts you see the promises of God were not demolished when the temple was two years or six months before these events God promises to do what humans cannot do what even God's good kings could not do he rescues because we cannot rescue ourselves when Jesus was born at Bethlehem it was not plan B it was not something de novo of God it was long awaited much anticipated long promised much needed we ought not fail to underestimate the enormity of his task because it would take his life laid down for the sheep but as a result we can say with even more confidence than David or Ezekiel the Lord is my shepherd therefore

I lack nothing our God is our good shepherd our Lord Jesus Christ and it's really wonderful isn't it that for our joy God has given us as Paul has alluded to our great psalm the 23rd psalm for us to praise him so let's stand and sing that now