**Shepherd**

Ezekiel 34

***The Lord is our Good Shepherd.*** The nation of Israel knew this from Psalm 23. And Jesus fulfilled this shepherding role, saying:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” John 10:11

Here is our lesson for today – a very simple one – **Good shepherds give. Bad shepherds take.**

***Our Good Shepherd gave EVERYTHING for us*** – He gave up His very life for us. Jesus is the ultimate Good Shepherd. He left the comfort of heaven to seek and save the lost. He came not to be served but to serve. He not only risked His life to save ours, He sacrificed His life in payment for ours. John 10:11 is a contrast:

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” John 10:10-11

***Jesus is the ultimate Good Shepherd.*** The devil is the ultimate bad shepherd. Ezekiel 34 exposes the leadership in Israel at the time of the exile as being made up of a lot of bad shepherds. They were not feeding and leading the people but were feeding and indulging only themselves. As I’ve studied Ezekiel 34 this week I’ve felt ***a lot of conviction for us as a church in America*** – how consumeristic we are, how oriented to our own desires, comforts and preferences.

My prayer today is that the Lord would ***use Ezekiel 34 to help us look into our own hearts*** to see how we are like Jesus – how we are good shepherds – but also how we fail to act like Jesus and are more like bad shepherds. Join me in Ezekiel 34. We’ll see **four characteristics of a bad shepherd** and then 4 contrasting qualities of a good shepherd. Ezekiel starts with the bad, and so will we.

**Bad Shepherds Take**

1. Neglecting the hungry

“Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?” Ezekiel 34:2

Ezekiel received a word from the Lord directly ***AGAINST the leaders in Israel.*** “Prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.” The reason God’s judgment was coming against the nation was the ongoing sin and rebellion of the people, instigated by one bad king after another, with only a few exceptions. Instead of caring for the people they were neglecting the people. Instead of gathering the people together they were allowing them to be scattered.

**Bad Shepherds Take**

1. Abusing the weak

“You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep.” Ezekiel 34:3

Not only did the leaders neglect their sheep, they ATE the sheep. Tragically during the siege of Jerusalem the people did devolve all the way down to eating their own children. But this is mostly a figurative judgment on the oppression and injustice perpetuated by the leaders of Israel at the expense of the weakest, most vulnerable among them. Instead of caring for the widow, orphan and foreigner, as God clearly commanded them to, they took advantage of them. They charged exorbitant interest, took bribes. In chapter 22 Ezekiel confronts ***Jerusalem as the “city of blood.”***

**Bad Shepherds Take**

1. Abusing the weak

“You have become guilty by the blood that you have shed… the sojourner suffers extortion in your midst; the fatherless and widow are wronged in you.” Ezekiel 22:4,9

You would expect this kind of abuse of power in Babylon or Assyria – but to find it rampant among the leadership in Israel was more than God could take. ***The cry of the oppressed reached His ears*** and our glorious Shepherding God moved to cast down these abusive leaders.

 **Bad Shepherds Take**

1. Abandoning the lost

“The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed… the strayed you have not brought back… and with force and harshness you have ruled them.” Ezekiel 34:4

The whole task of a shepherd is to tend the sheep – to take care of them, watch over them. ***But the leaders of Israel failed to care for the people***, utterly turning their backs on the needs right in front of them.

**Bad Shepherds Take**

1. Sacrificing others

“So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts… My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth.” Ezekiel 34:5-6

Good leaders sacrifice themselves. ***Bad leaders sacrifice their people.*** One of the reasons **Napoleon** was loved by his soldiers was because he did not leave the wounded to die. He set up field hospitals and medical trains to care for the wounded soldiers. I’m not saying he was a good guy, but in that sense he was a good leader.

**The French Revolution** was a clash of the classes. The poor lower class overthrew the wealthy aristocracy because the rich had been abusing and neglecting the poor for too long. Instead of using their wealth and influence to care for the poor in France, the rich simply got richer and indulged themselves. Eventually the poor got fed up with this - hence, the French Revolution. And Napoleon became a symbol to the rebels of a leader who cared for them.

The leaders in Israel were like the French aristocrats - indulging themselves while the common people starved. Instead of sacrificing their own comforts to care for the hungry people, ***they sacrificed the people***. They were bad shepherds. They abused, neglected and abandoned their people. Instead of setting the example for justice and compassion, they rejected the fair and generous provisions in God’s law and created a culture of oppression and gross inequality.

***Does any of this sound transferrable to our situation today?*** While we scramble to pay our mounting bills to finance our American lifestyle do we even think about the nearly 1 billion people in the world who are hungry? Or the 150 million children who are seriously malnourished? Or the 3.5 million who die every year from diseases in dirty water?

Physical hunger continues to be the world’s biggest problem, but spiritual hunger is actually far more serious. Around 2 billion people remain unaware of the Gospel. Still nearly 4,000 people groups do not have a single verse of Scripture in their own language. We are not only OVERFED physically, we are ridiculously OBESE spiritually.

***Do we use our wealth and education and opportunity to GIVE*** and share and bless those with less than we have? Or are we like the leaders in Israel who keep most of what we get for ourselves?

Bad shepherds take. **Good shepherds give.** Let’s look at the positive side of this - being encouraged AND challenged by the example of Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

“Thus says the Lord God: Behold, ***I, I myself will search for my sheep*** and will seek them out… I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered… And I will feed them.” Ezekiel 34:11-13

Since the leaders of His people FAILED, ***God promised that He Himself would come to be their shepherd.*** 600 years before Jesus was born God made this promise to His struggling and discouraged people: “I will come for you. I will seek the lost. I will gather in the straying. I will feed the hungry. I will take care of the sick.”

Ezekiel 34 belongs right alongside Isaiah 53 as one of the clearest Old Testament passages that so clearly describes ***Jesus the Messiah***. First:

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

1. Seeking the Lost

“As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered so I will seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them.” Ezekiel 34:12

The Good Shepherd came to seek and save the lost. He left the 99 to seek the 1. ***He came to be AMONG HIS SHEEP*** - He did not stay in the warm, comfortable house but went out into the cold, dark and dangerous world. Jesus stepped down from heaven to be born as a baby so He could be God WITH US. Those were the lengths our Good Shepherd went to come get us. His people were like sheep who had all gone astray. The whole nation of Israel had wandered away.

But God sent His only Son to gather back in the lost sheep of Israel. And along the way He opened up the gate so that the whole world could come in and become a part of His flock. The leaders of Israel ignored the people, neglecting them and abandoning them. But Jesus came. He sought us out. ***He came and called out to each one of us!***

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

1. Seeking the Lost - Jesus Came to Call us Home

“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out… he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.” John 10:3-4

Have you heard the voice of Jesus? ***Do you remember when He called your name?*** He said, “Come, follow me,” and you came. You knew His voice. You knew that was your Good Shepherd. Suddenly the other voices that had been calling you to follow them were unveiled as thieves and strangers.

First, the Good Shepherd gives by seeking the lost. Second by:

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 2. Serving the Hungry

“And I will gather them… And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel… I will feed them with good pasture…” Ezekiel 34:13-14

Instead of fattening Himself up and indulging His own desires, the Good Shepherd makes sure His sheep are fed. He leads us into green pastures and guides us to still waters. He knows exactly what we need and makes sure that we get it.

At the same time, ***our Good Shepherd knows what we DON’T need*** and has the authority to make the executive decision about WHEN we need certain things. The Shepherd / Sheep analogy is not meant to build up our self-esteem in terms of seeing how smart we are. It is meant to remind us that compared to God we are not so smart. God is as far above us mentally as we are above sheep.

And above all, God knows what we TRULY NEED is HIM.

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 2. Serving the Hungry - Jesus Died to Satisfy our Souls

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’” John 6:35

After feeding over 5,000 people Jesus tried to explain to them that ***what they really needed was not bread and fish but the very LIFE OF GOD*** inside of them. And he said there is only one way to get that - by EATING HIS FLESH.

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 2. Serving the Hungry - Jesus Died to Satisfy our Souls

“Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” John 6:54

The people struggled to understand this apparently vampire style teaching. But later today as we take communion together, gathered around **the Lord’s Table**, we can see the FEAST Jesus prepared for His followers through His body and blood. These are REAL food - essential SPIRITUAL FOOD for the soul. Jesus gave up His fully human body into death so we could benefit from that sacrifice.

***Some animal sacrifices were burned up whole.*** Others had parts that could be eaten - like the FELLOWSHIP offering. Those were designed to encourage fellowship with God and with each other in the community of God’s people - exactly like communion.

Our Good Shepherd not only leads us to green pastures in terms of physical blessings in this life, but **He primarily feeds us and satisfies us with the food we most desperately need** - the bread of His body on the cross, the blood that He shed for us as He died. Now we feed on the life of Jesus as we remember His sacrifice, believe in His sacrifice, enjoy the spiritual blessings of His sacrifice. For His body is real food and His blood is real drink.

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 3. Separating the Righteous

“Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats… I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.” (v. 17,20)

When food is scarce, ***the stronger sheep get to the food***, pushing the weaker ones aside. It wasn’t hard for the shepherd to know which ones were eating well and which ones were not - the strong ones got fat, the weak ones got skinnier. So the Shepherd had to intervene to be sure all the sheep got fed.

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 3. Separating the Righteous

“And they shall know that I am the Lord their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are **my people**.” Ezekiel 34:30

Throughout the Old Testament ***God was calling together a nation for His own possession*** - a group of believers, Law-followers who would represent Him on the earth. He wanted them to be a light to the world so all the nations would see the glory of the One True God. They were supposed to stand apart from the unrighteous, godless nations as a holy people, a chosen and set apart nation.

Unfortunately, ***most Israelites rejected God instead of following Him.*** They did not trust in Him but instead put their faith in the gods of other nations. They did not love Him but instead loved and pursued idols of wood and stone, speechless, powerless false gods. They did not serve Him but instead devoted themselves heart, mind and body to a host of demons.

This is why God sent them into exile in Assyria and Babylon - to purge the unrighteous from the righteous - to create a SEPARATION of those who were HIS from those who were NOT HIS. Jesus foretold the final separation that is coming, in Matthew 25:

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 3. Separating the Righteous - Jesus justifies those who Belong to Him

“Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” Matthew 25:32

The basis for this separation will be **the NATURE of the people** - as different as sheep are from goats. This is the final judgment that divides the righteous ones who will live with God in His holy heaven from the wicked ones who will be cast into eternal fire.

***Those who BELONG to Jesus by faith he JUSTIFIES*** - declaring them righteous not because of our efforts but because of His finished work on the cross. Those who have rejected Him Jesus condemns.

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 3. Separating the Righteous - Jesus justifies those who Belong to Him

“And then will I declare to them, ‘***I never knew you***; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” Matthew 7:23

In the end it’s a question of **whether Jesus KNOWS YOU** - whether you are HIS. We are His sheep who know His voice. When he called us, we came. Those who do not come to the call of Jesus are not His sheep. Those who do not follow Jesus do not belong to His fold. Listen again to John 10:

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 3. Separating the Righteous - Jesus justifies those who Belong to Him

“You do not believe because you are not among **my sheep**. **My sheep** hear my voice, and ***I know them***, and they follow me.” John 10: 26-27

That is the difference: those who know Jesus and are known by Him as opposed to those who do not believe in Him because they do not belong to Him. The unrighteous ones will be cast out. But listen to the opposite fate of the righteous ones:

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 3. Separating the Righteous - Jesus justifies those who Belong to Him

“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” John 10:28

**Here is the work of the Good Shepherd**: first, he seeks the lost, calling our names. Then he serves us - giving us the food of His own flesh and blood to satisfy our souls. Third, he separates us out from the world as those who belong to Him - He marks us as His own, giving us His own righteousness, filling us with His own LIFE and His Almighty Spirit. Because we belong to Jesus we will never perish and no one can ever snatch us away from Him. ***Nothing can ever separate us from the loving protection and provision*** of our Great God and Savior.

So we come back to the fundamental difference between bad shepherds and the Good Shepherd. Where bad shepherds TAKE, the Good Shepherd GIVES. Bad shepherds sacrifice their sheep. The Good Shepherd sacrifices HIMSELF.

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 4. Sacrificing Himself

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” John 10:11

What kind of shepherd runs away when a wolf appears? What kind of shepherd saves his own life at the expense of his helpless, vulnerable flock? A bad shepherd!

***Our Good Shepherd did not abandon us*** in the depth of our need. We were like helpless sheep, having strayed away from obedience to the Law of God, wandering into the deadly danger of our own sin and rebellion. But into that deadly pit our Lord and Savior descended so that His body could become our way of escape - our bridge from death into life.

Here is how Ezekiel saw it in v. 23:

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 4. Sacrificing Himself - Jesus gave up His Life to Give us His Life

“And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them… And I, the Lord, will be their God.” Ezekiel 34:23-24

In the dark time of the exile - a time of judgment, punishment and suffering - God gave Ezekiel a vision of HOPE in the coming Davidic Messiah. A true shepherd was coming - unlike all the leaders ever in Israel, even the best ones. ***This true Shepherd would feed them the food their souls so desperately needed.*** He would not just satisfy their physical bodies but would bring healing and wholeness to their souls. He would not just establish the royal Kingdom of David on earth, but would bring the very Kingdom of GOD into the earth so that the Lord Himself could be WITH HIS PEOPLE, dwelling with us and even IN US.

**The Good Shepherd Gives**

 4. Sacrificing Himself - Jesus gave up His Life to Give us His Life

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that ***they may have life*** and have it abundantly.” John 10:10

Our Good Shepherd laid down His life so that through His death and resurrection He could fill us with His life. ***This is what we celebrate as we gather around the Lord’s Table.*** We come to the table to feast on the food we most desperately need. We come to eat the body of the Lord Jesus - taking in, trusting in, relying upon His death to forgive us, cleanse us and make us His own. We come to drink the blood of Jesus - receiving His very LIFE inside of us to nourish us and fill us.

This is **the Blood of the New Covenant** - the fulfillment of everything we’ve been studying in the Old Testament. No longer an external covenant of Law written on stone but now an INTERNAL covenant of LOVE written on our hearts.

***The Good Shepherd came to seek and save the lost.*** The King of Heaven and Creator of All Things knelt down to serve us, becoming for us the bread of life and offering in His blood the living water we can drink and never thirst again. Our wonderful Savior separates us out as those who belong to Him, marking us with His love and filling us with His Spirit. And all of this is through His perfect sacrifice.

As we **come to the table today** we want to take some extra time to reflect on the glory of our Good Shepherd and how very far we all fall short of that glory. Communion is a natural time to think deeply and honestly about our sin. You’ll see the bread and juice is available today at two tables over by the Prayer Board. On those tables you will also find little cards and pens.

Before taking a piece of bread, we encourage you today to **first take a piece of paper** and write down one or two things you need to confess to the Lord. They might be big things or small things. The Holy Spirit will show you where to start. The point is to listen to the voice of your Shepherd. When He calls you away from some dangerous cliff, listen - come back to Him. When He picks you up to tend a wound, don’t fight against Him. Let Him do His healing work by removing that thorn, washing that gash.

Elaine will play for a while, giving us plenty of time to quietly reflect and then take a piece of bread and come back to our seats. Once everyone has gotten back we will partake of the bread together.

Consider carefully, brothers and sisters, ***how often we are like those bad shepherds*** who were leading Israel right into a time of judgment.

* Neglecting the hungry
* Abusing the weak
* Abandoning the lost
* Sacrificing others

May we confess our sins, turning away from them and **coming to our Good Shepherd** who wants to use us to continue His work

* Seeking the lost
* Serving the hungry
* Separating the righteous from the unrighteous in pursuit of true justice
* And sacrificing ourselves instead of indulging ourselves

Please take some time now to write out your confession and then ***take that paper outside to the little fire*** where you can drop it in, trusting the Lord Jesus to take all of our sin into His death. You’ll see some of us leaders have a lot of papers - we are sinners like the rest of you, but we’re not so bad we all need 20 papers. Those are the confessions from the last month, going back to our worship and prayer night in May. We wanted to symbolically burn all of those up at one time to show how our Gracious Lord takes our sins and removes them from us, as far as the east is from the west!

Instrumental - It is Well

Closing Song (cup) - Who You Say I Am