

<Read text: Ezekiel 34:11-16,23,24>

It is a comforting picture that our God paints for us here. Something certainly to look forward to, something to give us a light of hope in dark times. And that's exactly what it was for when Ezekiel first received the prophecy too. You see, things weren't great for him or his people at the time. They were in a foreign land, not the homeland that God promised would be theirs. Their home nation had been all but destroyed. Their cities were ruined, the temple of God smashed beyond repair and whoever was left was being ruled over by a pagan foreign nation. Things were bleak. But God, through Ezekiel, brought this message of hope. God had not abandoned them. He would gather the people back up, he would bring them to a fertile land and he would set one over them who would shepherd them properly.

It was a fine relief for God's people to hear this, to know this about what was coming. But then, before we get too sympathetic for their plight, perhaps we should also look back and remember *why* they were in the situation they were. It wasn't like they were just this tiny helpless nation that some of the bigger bullies came along to pick on. They weren't just minding their own business and suddenly they were attacked. No, they earned every iota of the attack that came on them. God had made that nation a pact when they came to the land that was theirs. Worship him alone as God, trust in him alone and he would always be there for them, he would always defend them and be their God.

But they didn't. Long before they were physically scattered from their land, the people scattered themselves spiritually. They were barely in the Palestine area for one generation before they started to slip. And thus began the repeating dance that lasted centuries. The sheep would run from God their shepherd. And so God showed them what it would be like without him. He allowed enemies and disasters until they remembered they needed God. And they would return and he would welcome them with forgiveness. And then they would start all over again. For hundreds of years God put up with this infernal pattern of theirs. Think about that. How many times in a row does someone have to let you down in exactly the same way before you say, "forget it, no more."? For me it's usually between two and three. God, in his mercy and patience let this go on dozens and dozens of times over hundreds of years.

But finally God said, "Forget it, no more." And he let them be as scattered as they wanted to be from him. The situation that the people found themselves was not just entirely of their own making, it was one that should've happened a long, long time ago, but God in his patience put off.

And now God was again going to show them mercy. Even this he would rescue them from. Even this he would take them out of and bring them back. The consequences may have escalated but the dance really didn't change. God did not *want* to hurt these people. He wanted them to be his. He wanted them back. And if they would have him, he would take them.

Now, when it comes to watching the history of the Israelite people, there can be a lot of mixed emotion flying around. They suffered to be sure, so we might feel some pity. But they definitely brought it on themselves, so there could be a kind of self-righteous looking-down on them. They sure had it coming! Even maybe a bit of indignation that God would still welcome them back after everything they did! Or at the very least a sort of haughty, "Well, I sure hope they learned their lesson this time!"

But before we start feeling any of those emotions too strongly, let's take the history of the nation of Israel with all its ups and downs and mercy that God showed them, let's take that long timeline, and let's overlay it with the short span of your own life. Because I think the two overlap more than we care to admit at first glance.

Like the people of Israel we actually started our life apart from God. From the moment we were born, from the moment we were conceived even, we were separated from him. We were born in sin, inherited from sinful parents. Unholy. And the unholy cannot enter the presence of God. We were not born innocent, we were not born neutral. We were born at odds with our creator. But God was not willing that we should remain that way. And so scattered though we were, he came and sought us out. We didn't want him but he found us. He called to us with a voice that changed our hearts and made us trust him. He called to us in his word, he washed us at our baptism and he made us his own. He gathered us to himself.

Just like he did when he made the nation of Israel his own.

And just like Israel, we wander.

God called us to himself, God made us his own. He brought us to him where the best living is. He teaches us his ways that are the best, he provides for us richly and daily. He only allows what trouble will help and strengthen us in the end. He does everything for us. Just like he did for Israel. And still we wander.

We think that the grass over the hill there looks a lot better than where we're sitting now. And so we wander into greediness and coveting. We think that what God has given us isn't good enough, it isn't enough. We think that he doesn't do a good enough job caring for us, and we're flat out unhappy with what we have. We want more. We chase after the things of this world, we waste so much time and energy to get more and more and then to keep more and more for ourselves and God, the one who gave us everything, is left behind and forgotten. All that becomes relevant is adding to that pile. Oh it never happens all at once, a bit at a time we're distracted further and further away from the Shepherd until we can't see him anymore.

Or maybe we look at that stream across the way and think, that would be fun to play in. The shepherd said we shouldn't but we know better. It'll be a great time, he's worrying too much. And so we go off on our adventures of food or drink or sex or whatever fun we think we need to indulge in to be happy. And as we splash around to our heart's content we fail to notice the strength of the current or the rocks hiding in the way, and we end up carried off and hurt.

Or maybe we just give in to that old arrogance of thinking we're not really a sheep. We can wander in the wilderness all we like, we're strong enough, we're capable enough. We know better than our shepherd or at least as much as him. We'll make do just fine without him along. When we need him for something we'll come back. And so we wander away, easy prey for the wolves of Satan and the world, led astray and devoured before we have time to cry out.

Again and again we wander away when we know we shouldn't.

Again and again our shepherd comes after us. He shouldn't. We don't deserve it. But God comes for us and tries to bring us back. He can't force us back, but he comes looking for us all the same. He calls to us with the voice we know. If we won't listen, sometimes he allows us to get hurt by our foolishness so that he can offer to bind up our wounds. Sometimes the injuries need to be pretty severe before we own up to realizing how badly we failed and how much we need our God to help us.

But the shepherd is always there to lead us back. And while we do stay with him we are given exactly what was promised through Ezekiel. We are led on the best ways. To the best life. When we listen and follow our God through his word, things are as good as they can get here on earth. Not perfect, not painless, but as good as they can be. When we allow him to guide us we don't wander into dangers of our own making. When we trust his lead we don't end up hurt by our foolish mistakes. And when the world at large threatens us, our Shepherd will always step in to protect us from the worst.

And the worst is what could happen to us if we are lost for good during our time here. We may have a few scrapes and bruises on the path but the important thing is that we don't lose the path. That we stay with our Shepherd and follow his guidance. Because he is leading us to the ultimate fulfilment of what is promised here. Our heavenly home. That is the only permanent escape from danger for us. That is the only permanent home we can find. And we can only reach it with our Shepherd's lead.

There we will be brought to the final rest. What Ezekiel pictures here will be complete. Right now our Shepherd guides us and cares for us, but it's not our home, it's just the best path to that home. He comes after us all and gathers us to him so that we can make that journey together safely. But the end is still to come. And the end will be great. As our Shepherd rules and watches us now, he will do just that perfectly and permanently. And perfectly not because he is somehow lacking now, but perfectly because we will no longer wander. There will be nowhere else to go. There will only be our Shepherd watching us for eternity.

And it should be obvious whom we're talking about here. The one who calls us to himself, who watches over and rules us now and the one who can lead us to the perfect eternal pasture. Our King and our Shepherd Christ. Who gave his life that we might live with him and under his rule for eternity. He is the one God will appoint in this reading, he is the servant David. Not literally David, he was dead for a long time when this was written. But the one after God's own heart, the best ruler the nation had ever seen. A metaphorical David who will surpass even the real David. Christ. Our King and our Shepherd.

He is over us, but never in a way we need fear. Because he is a ruler in the best sense. The one that always seeks the best of his subjects, who only ever uses his authority to care for us. With this Shepherd-King over us we do not need to fear, we do not need to complain! Under him we are cared for in the best possible way now and guided by him we are being led to the best place there ever could be. And there we will be with him perfectly forever. Amen.