

## **“I Wish I Was A Sheep”**

A Sermon by Don Cummings  
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I wish I was a sheep.

I don't know how well you know the Old Testament.  
We haven't been together long enough  
for me to have a sense of your biblical knowledge.

I do know that we Christians  
typically pay less attention to the Old Testament  
than we give to the New Testament.  
But we ignore the Old Testament to our own impoverishment.  
We really need the Old Testament  
to fully understand and appreciate the New Testament.

Admittedly, the Old Testament is not always  
the easiest part of the Bible to read and understand.

Take the book of Ezekiel for example.

One could browse through these writings from the prophet  
and wonder “What is he talking about?”

To modern ears this collection of oracles sounds  
fanciful, threatening, doomy and gloomy.  
Not the kind of reading you want to do  
before going to bed at night.

And then you get to chapter 34,  
from which our lesson for today comes.  
And this part of Ezekiel sounds different.  
It sounds not only very familiar, but also very comforting.

As we read it we are even tempted to say,  
“Well, that's nice. That's very nice.  
It sounds very much like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.  
That's nice.”

But this response would woefully under-value today's lesson.  
What we need to fully appreciate Ezekiel 34 is some context.

Let me take you back in time.

King David and Bathsheba's son, Solomon,  
has died after a 40-year reign as King of Israel.

The opulence and excesses of his administration  
have bled his subjects dry through taxes and fees.

The people are so fed up that when Solomon's son  
ascends to the throne and tries to carry on  
his father's profligate policies and royal luxuries,  
civil war breaks out.

The result is a divided kingdom in which  
ten of Israel's twelve tribes  
pull away to form their own nation.

They occupy the regions north of Jerusalem  
and retain the name Israel.

The remaining two tribes inhabit Jerusalem  
and the lands to the south and take the name Judah.

Over the next several hundred years,  
both the Northern Kingdom of Israel,  
and the Southern Kingdom of Judah,  
suffer through several prolonged series of kings  
who succumb to seductive treaties  
with surrounding empires and turn their backs  
on the covenant relationship God had made with  
the people he had chosen  
to be his representatives in the world.

God raised up prophets throughout this period  
to proclaim to the people of both kingdoms  
what was displeasing to God,  
calling them to repent and return to the Lord,  
and warning them of the consequences of  
the path they were on if they did not heed God's call to repent.

The prophets spoke truth to power,  
delivering God's judgment upon those kings  
whose corrupt administrations  
imperiled the survival of the people  
God had raised up to be a light to the nations.

One king after another turned deaf ears  
to both the Lord's prophets, and to the Lord.

What happened next came to be understood  
by both the prophets and the people  
to be God's judgment against the failure of  
the Israelite's to remain faithful to the covenant relationship with God.

In 722 BCE, the Assyrian empire swept into Palestine  
and conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel.  
The ten northern tribes were dispersed  
throughout the Middle East, were made to intermarry  
with the surrounding non-Jewish populace  
and essentially became lost to history.

In 586 BCE, the Babylonian empire  
swept into southern Palestine and  
conquered Jerusalem, exiling a large proportion  
of the two southern tribes of Judah to Babylon.

The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed as people are  
cast out of their homes,  
taken to a foreign land,  
and cut off from everything that had  
given them their identity as a distinct and holy people.

Getting back to our reading for today,  
the prophet Ezekiel was among the first group of  
Judeans who were taken into exile in Babylon.

We can only imagine, and imperfectly at that,  
how utterly devastating this time was for God's people.

It would be as if, when we walked out of church this morning,  
we were surrounded by an invading army  
and shuttled off to transports that whisked us away  
to a foreign land with no opportunity to gather  
any of our belongings or personal treasures  
before losing sight of our homeland.

As we look over our shoulders,  
stealing glances at what is happening behind us  
we see our church going up in flames.

In fact, the whole country  
is filled with smoke and destruction

as everything we have loved and treasured  
is being destroyed before our eyes.

After months of being jostled here and there  
we finally arrive at an unfamiliar destination,  
from which we are told we will never return.

Do you get the picture?

It was in a time like this that Ezekiel prophesied.  
The people were desperate to understand  
why such a tragedy had fallen upon them.

It was Ezekiel's task to convey to them  
the harsh truth that their persistent disobedience to God  
had led them to this place.

It was also Ezekiel's task in exile with his fellow Jews  
to preach hope.

Now, I want you this morning to enter into, ever so briefly,  
the devastation the people felt,  
believing that God had forsaken and abandoned them,  
so that you may hear with redeeming freshness  
the message of hope  
God gave Ezekiel to proclaim to the people of Israel.

I invite you to close your eyes for the next few moments.

If you can, imagine that scene I described a moment ago  
of our beloved homeland filled with destruction,  
and all of us being carried away to a foreign and hostile land,  
and told by our gloating captors that  
America's time is over and we will never go home again.  
Let this sink in for a moment.

Now, comes a word from the Lord.

As we hear it, remember that in the ancient near east,  
secular rulers were often perceived to be the shepherds  
of their subjects, charged with the duty of caring for  
the citizens of their kingdoms.

With eyes still closed,  
hear this message of hope

that came to God's people  
in their most desperate hour.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, & 20-24 (NIV)

<sup>11</sup> “For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

<sup>12</sup> As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

<sup>13</sup> I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land.

<sup>14</sup> I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

<sup>15</sup> I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD.

<sup>16</sup> I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

<sup>20</sup> “Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

<sup>21</sup> Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away,

<sup>22</sup> I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another.

<sup>23</sup> I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.

<sup>24</sup> I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

Did you hear how many times God said, in one way or another,

“I will care for my sheep”?

Twenty-one times in eleven verses.

Did you get the message?

When Judah's earthly leaders  
failed generation after generation  
to be the shepherds of the people,  
and whose faith-less-ness  
brought destruction upon their sheep,  
God finally stepped in to shepherd his sheep.

And in God's shepherding was judgment against  
those failed shepherds and bully sheep  
who hurt God's people and led them astray.

So, like I said at the beginning,  
I wish I was a sheep.

Oh, I am a sheep!

And so are you.

And the Lord is our shepherd.

Prayer:

O Shepherd God,  
who cares for your sheep,  
more than we can ever know or imagine,  
this grateful flock turns our hearts toward you  
to thank and bless you for the bountiful pastures  
in this bountiful land with which you have graced us.

Keep us faithful to the New Covenant you have made with us  
and with all people of the earth,  
through your Son, Jesus Christ,  
whom you gave to declare to us,  
"I am the good shepherd,  
and I know my sheep and my sheep know me."

And all God's sheep said, "Amen."