

Ezekiel 34 vs11-24 (esp. 15-16)

God continues to promise to be the shepherd of the flock. The Jews hear these words from God, 'I myself will tend my sheep'. Much later in history they hear these words from the lips of Jesus, 'I am the good shepherd' (John 10 v 11). You can imagine how that would have come across. Jesus was claiming to be the shepherd written about in Ezekiel 34 which meant he was claiming to be God! No wonder he was accused of being mad or demon possessed (John 10v19) or why they threw rocks at him (John 10v31).

Verse 23 speaks of God appointing one shepherd, my servant David. At first this confused me as these words were written about 500 years after David had died. David himself, though he was, 'a man after God's own heart' and a good example of a shepherd king, claims in Psalm 23 that the Lord is his shepherd! Verse 23 is actually referring to Jesus as a descendant of David who will be the one shepherd.

History and our own personal experience have proved this to be true. He comes as the one shepherd who will unite the flock (John 10v16). He will look for the one lost sheep (v11 and Luke 15 v 3-7). He is the shepherd who will one day separate the sheep from the goats on judgement day (v17 and Mat 25v31-46). He is the shepherd who carries us as lambs close to his heart; can you get any closer??!! (Isaiah 40v11). And is still carrying us in our old age (Isaiah 46v4).

There is much of the language used by God in Psalm 23 mirrored in this chapter but one phrase, 'make them lie down' (v15 and Psalm 23v2) has caught my eye.

Sheep will not lie down unless they are content. They must be free from fear and usually then only lie down when they have been well fed! This kind of contentment comes from knowing Jesus as our shepherd. Not only does God provide for us physically through his creation but also spiritually through feeding on his word. Whilst danger is all around us we also know there is nothing that can separate us from his love. (Ro 8v38, 39)

Read verse 21. The sheep would be standing for all this 'in-fighting'. We are able to 'lie down' in harmony with other members of the flock but only when we are all following the one shepherd.

It's highly unlikely that we will come across any leader, boss, politician, celebrity or even minister who will be prepared to lay down his life for us. Jesus already has. Let's willingly submit to the one Good Shepherd King.

Ezekiel 34 vs 25-28

By reading without going too deep into the symbolism of this passage, we get an overriding sense of peace, blessing and safety for the sheep.

Jesus heralds the new covenant of peace (v25) and in picture language changes the old life at the mercy of wild animals, drought, famine and wars to a new life of safety, rain in season, fruitfulness and peace.

Jesus, the one true shepherd, who comes to the hill of Zion, begins to build his church in Jerusalem. The people of that church and the places they live will become a blessing to others. (v26)

It is because of the peace Jesus gives that they are able to be a blessing to others. Peace means so much more than just the absence of conflict. Jesus said, 'And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.' (John 14 v 27 NLT)

The Hebrew word for peace is 'shalom' and it incorporates many meanings. Peace, harmony, contentment, completeness, wholeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility. A state of complete well being that drives out all fear.

To those who enter into this covenant is given a real, everlasting, not-dependent-on-feelings peace.

Many in this world are afraid of storms, crime, pain, failure, poverty, unemployment, rejection, sickness, old age and death. Christ comes to deal with those fears to bring peace into the hearts of our lives as we trust the shepherd to keep us safe and free from fear. (v28)

After the Gospels, the book of Acts and the letters much was recorded in other history books about what was happening during the early church. An extraordinary peace was given to Christians as they faced barbaric treatment at the hands of the Romans. Dignity, singing and praying was witnessed as the lions approached and the flames rose.

An example of this peace was witnessed at the death of Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna. He was eventually arrested by the Romans because of his Christian teaching and told to curse Christ! In reply Polycarp said, I have served Christ for 86 years and he has never failed me. Could you curse such a friend?' He was warned he would be burnt at the stake to which he said, 'You threaten me with a fire that burns for a while then goes out. You are ignorant of the flames of eternal judgement.' Eventually the wood was lit below Polycarp but the flames arched around him and didn't burn him. He only died when an executioner was ordered to plunge his sword into him.

Poly carp wasn't spared death but he was certainly spared from fear as he continued in prayer from within the flames.

Neither must we allow fears or anxieties rob us of the peace found with Christ. He is all powerful and the Good Shepherd.

'Do not be anxious about anything ..... present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.'  
(Phil 4 v 6-7)

Ezekiel 34 v 31

This wonderful chapter where God describes his relationship with his people using the sheep/shepherd picture culminates in this final verse. In it, God gets personal and moves from the future to the present. Let's just dwell on this one verse and all that it means.

Nine times so far in this chapter God has spoken to Ezekiel about 'his' flock or 'his' sheep. Now he turns to his flock and speaks to them directly. He says, 'You my sheep' and to make sure we realise he is now talking directly to us he says, 'You my sheep....are my people!

He has referred to good pasture, good grazing and rich pasture previously but now he calls it, 'my pasture'. His people in his creation. His people enjoying the physical and spiritual blessings of his pasture. We are the people of his pasture. It's ours! It's there for the benefit of us, his people!

Next he says, 'I am your God'. We belong to him and he belongs to us. The Sovereign Creator God allows himself to belong to his people!

Then notice God says, 'you my sheep....are my people.' Present tense! The future starts today. Once we are his people we will be his people forever.

The peace we looked at in yesterday's passage is real but it is only a foretaste of what is to come. We live in a fallen world and being his people does not spare us from its difficulties. We experience many trials of one kind or another. We are probably all facing some kind of hardship of our own during these unusual times.

But even in these trials we can know the peace and inexpressible joy because of the closeness of the Shepherd.

A time will come for those in the flock when suffering, pain, conflict and hardship will cease.

'For the Lamb at the centre of the throne  
will be their shepherd;  
He will lead them to springs of living water.  
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes' (Rev 7 v 17)

On this day the Lamb of God sacrificed in our place will gather together his worldwide flock into his presence.

Let's stay close to our Shepherd, feed on his Word, listen for his voice, accept his protection and put our trust in him.

Daily Devotions    Thursday 21st May 2020

Ezekiel 36 vs 16-23

This passage is all about holiness. Holiness implies something dedicated to God for his purposes. It's meaning carries with it God-like qualities such as purity and freedom from sin. A thing, place, or a person can be holy.

God had given his holy people a holy land to live in (Israel) but they had desecrated it by their sin and idolatry. God removed these sinful people from his holy land (v19).

They mix with Gentiles (non-Jews) and God sees that they are giving him a bad name by their witness (v20). They, the special holy nation, had adopted the ways of the pagans they were living amongst. Four times God laments that his holy name has been profaned (vs 20,21,22,23). As we heard from Richard on Sunday a repetition of 3 means emphasis! God is definitely concerned, but why?

It is because his salvation is not just for the Jews but for the whole world. He wants the greatness of his name to spread among the peoples of the rest of the world. 'For God so loved the world....' (John 3v16) The Jews had been entrusted with holiness. They were meant to be different from the world and display God's character.

God steps in once again. He says that for the sake of his holy name he is going to do something to restore his honour (v22-23). More on that tomorrow.

I'm sure you're already thinking about the application. Remember Colossians 3 v12? 'God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved.

Do we live as the holy people among others who have little time for God and worship gods of their own? Are we distinct or do we prefer to blend in with the culture and it's values? Let's allow God to show us how we have compromised with our lifestyles and let down his holy name.

A healthy fish swims against the current rather than go with the flow!

Be holy because I am holy (1 Peter 1 vs 16)

Daily Devotions      Friday 22nd May 2020

Ezekiel 36 vs 24-32

Biblically the heart is the place where we think, decide and will. So far there has been a constant problem with the hearts of the Jews. Despite God's unchanging mercy, goodness and patience, time and again they turned from him back to their inherent sinful nature. God had given them his promises, fertile land, his presence and a set of rules to live a life that would not bring disgrace on him.

They needed a radical inner change. A new heart that would love God and be obedient to him. He promises to change their hearts of stone (hard and cold) to a heart of flesh (soft and warm) (v26). He promises to put his own Spirit in them. (v27) This was no Botox operation!! They were under God's judgement and wrath and needed a way out. Just as he always has, God provides the way but how?

There is a scene in the film Bruce Almighty where Bruce (Jim Carey) is asking for God's help to get his girlfriend back after she's spurned him. He asks, 'How can I make her love me?' God (Morgan Freeman) replies, 'Welcome to my world!' How can God win his people back? The answer was through his Son Jesus.

It is human to love those who love us. God's greatest act of love was to allow his beloved Son to be sacrificed instead of us for our sins. When we realise this is personal and not just for religious nuts our response can surely only be to love him back.

'Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.' (John 15 v 13, 14)

There comes a time when we realise we are like the Israelites. We realise we are just trying to stick to the rules but only when it suits us. We realise we are not what God wants us to be.

When we see our sin as God sees it, it sickens us (v31) and it is then that God can help us no matter what is in our past. If we repent of our sin and submit to Christ we will be born again with a new heart and his Spirit. And be spared from God's wrath!

Praise God if this is true of us but even us Christians need the constant cleansing that true confession brings (v25).

'Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5 v7,8),

## Daily Devotions

### Ezekiel 37 vs 1-13 (esp. 1-3)

Why couldn't the skeleton go to the party? Because he had nobody to go with!!

It might be just a joke but there is some relevance in it for the Israelites. The vision is about how one day God will provide new resurrection bodies for his people in the new heaven and earth. An eternal party!!

At the time of the vision the tribes of Israel had been widely scattered among surrounding nations, three of them being held captive in Babylon. It appeared that for them to be one united nation now was a lost cause.

The purpose of the vision is to emphasise what God had planned (yesterday's study) and inspire the people with the hope that one day God would revive them as a nation. This prophecy has yet to be fulfilled.

Ezekiel is transported in the vision to a valley full of human bones. He was made to move amongst them. As a way of emphasising an already desperate environment, Ezekiel tells us the bones were very dry. There is absolutely no life left. This was the spiritual state of the Israelites.

On a different level we can also apply this to the world we live in today. To God, there are so many of his created people who are dead to him.

Ezekiel was a priest and, as such, would have become unclean by touching a dead body! But this was the story of Ezekiel's life. He, in a totally selfless way allowed himself to be defiled so that he could bring the hope of God to a lost world.

This son of man eventually was succeeded by the Son of Man, Jesus, who had much the same mission.

Thursday was Ascension Day. On that day in history when Jesus went from earth up to heaven, his parting words to his disciple were, 'You will be my witnesses...' (Acts 1 v 8). Nothing has changed. As Ezekiel and Jesus did we are also called to bring the word of God to a spiritually dead people.

We may have friends and family who we consider too dead and dry to ever be able to respond to the good news of God's word but no one could be more dead than the dry skeletons Ezekiel was about to speak to!!

God asks Ezekiel, 'Can these bones live'. I think I'd have said, 'No way'. Ezekiel knew it was completely in God's hands. 'O Sovereign Lord you alone know'. (v3)

What would our loved ones say to us if they ended up in hell and we hadn't warned them? Our job is to speak, the rest is in God's hands and as the angel Gabriel said to Mary, 'Nothing is impossible with God'. (Luke 1v37)