

## **An Ancient Christmas: The Coming of Jesus in the Old Testament — The Shepherd**

**Ezekiel 34:1-31**

**By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)**

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Ezekiel chapter 34 as we continue working our way through this series, "An Ancient Christmas: The Coming of Jesus in the Old Testament." In the year 597 BC, Ezekiel was called to the ministry by a river in Babylon with a vision of the glory of God. Ezekiel as a teenager would perhaps have heard Jeremiah preach. Think of that, to, as a teenager, have heard Jeremiah preach. Many of the passages in this sometimes very difficult book are reflections on passages from Jeremiah's preaching. We studied the branch passage together as a part of this series from Jeremiah 23:1-6. Ezekiel 34 looks like a reflection on Jeremiah 23 verses 1 to 6. Ezekiel was a contemporary of Daniel, Daniel the great leader and prophet of God's people. And you remember Daniel quotes from Jeremiah and he reads Jeremiah while he is in exile in Babylon.

Well in 597, Ezekiel was part of the exiles that were taken to Babylon by the king, Nebuchadnezzar, who had conquered Israel. In that same year, Nebuchadnezzar set up Zedekiah as a puppet king, as a king who was tributary to him. He was of the line of David but he was subservient to Nebuchadnezzar. And Zedekiah would become the last king of Israel. Zedekiah would reign about ten years and then in about 587 BC, Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and the rebellion was failed and Nebuchadnezzar's fury was hot. And when Zedekiah attempted to escape, he was captured, he was brought to Nebuchadnezzar, his sons were brought before him, and were slaughtered before his eyes. And then his eyes were put out and he was put in chains and taken to Babylon where he lingered long and he died, so that the last thing he ever saw with his eyes was the end of the line of David, or so he thought. These were serious times; great challenges to Israel's faith. You could imagine how Israelites would have wondered, "Where is God in all of this?" God who promised that David would never lack a man on his throne forever. God who promised that His people would be planted in the land and now the people are in exile. And God rose up great prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel to speak to His people in these dark, gray times. And this is one of the prophecies that Jeremiah uttered to his people when he himself was in exile with them in Babylon. And it's a prophecy about a Shepherd-King who is to come.

I want you to look at the passage with me so that you can follow along in the

reading and I want you to see six parts in this passage. This sermon is going to be a one-point sermon, but we're going to follow through each of the six steps in this passage together just so that we understand where Ezekiel is coming from and where he is going. The first part you will see in verses 1 to 6. In Ezekiel 34 verses 1 to 6, the Lord will indict the kings and the priests of Israel for their failure in leading Israel. Then, in verses 7 to 10, He will bring a judgment against the leaders of Israel, both kings and priests, for failing in their responsibility, to God and to His people. Third, in verses 11 to 17, God will announce, "Since these leaders have been unfaithful, since these kings have failed their purposes with My people, I'm going to be the King of My people; I'm going to be the leader of My people. I, Myself, am going to intervene on their behalf. I'm going to bring them out of their captivity, I'm going to place them back in their land, I'm going to fill their lives with blessing and plenty, I'm not going to delegate this to anybody — I'm going to do it Myself." That's the theme of verses 11 to 16.

But then, when you get to verses 17 to 19, the Lord turns from this situation with the leaders of Israel and He turns to the people themselves. And in verses 17 to 19, He pronounces judgment on the selfish people in Israel who have oppressed their fellow citizens. And He says, "I'm going to separate sheep from sheep. I'm going to separate the righteous from the unrighteous. I'm going to separate the oppressors from the weak, and I'm going to judge the oppressors and I'm going to save and rescue the weak." Then in verses 20 to 24, He announces that He is going to set up a successor to David to lead His people. Now feel the tension there for a moment. In verses 11 to 16, He says, "No more. I'm not delegating this. I'm going to lead My people." God Himself is going to lead His people. But in verses 20 to 24 He says, "I'm going to set up a successor to David to lead My people." Now which is it? And Old Testament commentators puzzle over this. Ezekiel is so emphatic that God Himself will be King. Who then is this that He's speaking about in verses 20 to 24 and how can it be that He will lead His people, He Himself, and He will appoint someone to lead His people. Which is it? Think about that as we look at the passage. And then finally, in verses 25 to 31, the Lord says that He will establish a covenant of peace with His people. And again, this is Ezekiel reflecting on what Jeremiah says in Jeremiah chapter 31 where he announces a new covenant that God is going to make with His people.

Well those are the six parts of Ezekiel 34. Let's pray and ask for God's blessing as we read it together.

*Heavenly Father, this is Your Word. We thank You for it. We ask that You would open our eyes to behold wonderful things in it. Father, this is an unfamiliar word. It's not a passage that we dwell on often, but You have so much in it to teach us. So we pray that by Your Holy Spirit we would understand it and we would believe it, and You would so press it's truth home to our hearts that our hearts would respond in faith, Gospel faith, Christian faith, to You. We ask these things in Jesus' name, amen.*

This is the Word of God. Hear it, in Ezekiel chapter 34, beginning in verse 1:

The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, 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 fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As I live, declares the Lord God, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, 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, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require 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, that they may not be food for them.

"For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares 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 in justice.

"As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the

rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

"Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken.

"I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land. And they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them. They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid. And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord God. And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord God."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

God promises to shepherd His people Himself. God promises to appoint a Shepherd for His people. How does He do those things at the same time? "I, Myself will be your shepherd...I will appoint a shepherd for you." Ezekiel and Jesus explain the meaning of this passage, and I want us to look at the great point of this passage that God has promised and provided the Shepherd that His people need. And the Shepherd that His people need is Himself. But on the way I want us to see seven things to that one point.

## **THE SHEPHERD METAPHOR**

And the first thing has to do with shepherd. Shepherd is a metaphor for both

spiritual and religious leaders in the Bible. And the shepherd, as a metaphor for kings, is well-known both inside and outside the Scriptures. If we were to go back almost four and a half thousand years to 2,450 BC, we could find the story of an ancient Sumerian king who said that his god owned the land and appointed him to be a shepherd over it. That image of kings being shepherds was common in the ancient near east. In fact, in and around Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel's time, Assurbanipal, the king of Assyria, and Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, both called themselves shepherds. It was a classic image of kings. In fact, you remember Isaiah will call the pagan, Persian king, Cyrus, a shepherd, because the Lord was going to use Cyrus, even though he was a pagan, back into the land.

So shepherd is a metaphor for spiritual and governmental or political leaders. And in this passage, when Ezekiel speaks about the shepherds of Israel — and you notice he uses that phrase in verse 2 twice, three times in verse 2, “the shepherds of Israel,” even to the shepherds, “the shepherds of Israel” — he is speaking to the kings of Israel, the ruling class, and he's speaking to the priests. So it's important for us to understand that when the Old Testament uses the image of shepherd, that is often an image for the king and for the spiritual leaders of the land. Why? Because shepherds are supposed to look out for the wellbeing of the flock that has been entrusted to them, just as religious and governmental leaders and supposed to be serving the interests of the people who have been entrusted to their care. So we need to understand that first — shepherd is a metaphor for spiritual and governmental leaders.

## **THE LORD'S INDICTMENT OF THE ISRAEL'S SHEPHERDS**

Here's the second thing I want you to see. Look at verses 1 to 6. Here, we see the Lord's prophetic indictment against Israel's shepherds because of their failures. Here we see an indictment against the kings, the ruling class, and even the priests because of the way that they have failed Israel. They have failed to shepherd; they have failed to lead well. And notice especially verses 3 and 4 how this is described. “Should not shepherds feed the sheep?” — verse 2. Yet what has Israel's leader, what have they done? “You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep.” Instead of feeding the sheep they feed on the sheep. Now remember that Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel all confronted the kings of Israel for not trusting in God, for making entangling alliances with pagan nations, and with committing idolatry themselves. So instead of looking after the spiritual wellbeing of Israel, they had done what they wanted to. They, instead of feeding the sheep, they feed on the sheep, they led them astray, they did not serve them well. And God is indicting them.

He goes on. If you look at verse 4 — “The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you

have not brought back, the lost you have not sought.” In other words, they have especially failed those who were weakest and most vulnerable. Instead of like a good king, wanting the prosperity and the common good for all, and then especially taking care of those who were most likely to be overlooked and oppressed, they have only served themselves. And so the Lord brings an indictment against those shepherds. So when He speaks of an indictment against shepherds, He's speaking of the kings and even the spiritual leaders of Israel.

I was talking to Brister Ware after the early service and he said, “As a minister, this passage makes me tremble.” And I said, “Brister, I've been trembling for two weeks because this passage is speaking to me as much as it was speaking to a king of Israel.” My responsibility is to serve you not to feed on you. My responsibility is to do you good not to gain off of you. And it's a terrible indictment here against both the spiritual and the governmental leaders of Israel.

## **THE LORD'S PROPHETIC JUDGMENT**

Here's the next thing I want you to see. Look at verses 7 to 10. Here we see the Lord's prophetic judgment of Israel's shepherds. And I want you to look especially at verse 10. He says three things: “I am against the shepherds; I will require my sheep at their hands; and I will put a stop to their feeding the sheep.” Because they haven't fed the sheep the Lord is against them, He's going to hold them to account, and He is going to cease their kingship. They are no longer going to be kings over His people and that is true, that is true. The line of David over a nation ends there. When Zedekiah is carted, blind and bereft of seed into Babylon, the reign of a Davidic king over the nation of Israel on the side of the Mediterranean Sea in Palestine comes to an end. And Ezekiel is explaining that, not as a failure of God's promise to David, but as an indictment and a judgment against the wickedness of the king who did not reign like David. They did not follow the example of faithful, believing father David. They went their own way, they did their own thing, and God is judging them by bringing them to an end. He is stopping their kingship. So it's a judgment against Israel's shepherds.

## **THE LORD WILL SHEPHERD HIS PEOPLE**

Then, He says these amazing words in verses 11 to 16. The Lord announces that in the place of these unfaithful shepherds, He Himself is going to be the Shepherd of His people. Look at what Ezekiel tells us, especially in verses 11 and 15. “Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and will seek them out. I Myself will be the shepherd of My sheep, and I Myself will make them lie down, declares the LORD GOD.” In this whole passage, repeatedly God says, “No more appointees, no more kings to do this in My place. I'm going to do this Myself. I'm going to be your King, I'm going to be your Shepherd, I'm going to

provide for your security, I'm going to seek you out and bring you back from the land, I'm going to plant you in firm pasture, I'm going to bring blessing upon you. I'm going to do it Myself." And so the Lord is announcing that He Himself will be the Shepherd of His people. And this is so important because the kings of Israel had been looking to alliances with other nations as the source of the security of God's people. And God is saying, "No, your security will not come from them. In fact, your alliances with other nations is going to take you into exile and you're going to be scattered all over the earth. But I Myself am going to be your Shepherd, I'm going to be your King, and I'm going to bring you back."

Ezekiel is echoing the words of the contemporary prophet, Tina Turner, from "Mad Max Beyond the Thunderdome." Can you believe it was twenty-seven years ago? 1985 is when that came out. You remember what she sang? "We don't need another hero." That song begins, "Out of the wreckage, out of the ruins." The whole song is about not putting your trust in another failed leader that comes along. And Ezekiel has the same feeling. "I'm not putting my trust in the kings anymore." And God says, "No, it's not another human hero that you need. It's Me that you need."

You know, four or so years ago our president stood at the Brandenburg Gate and said, "We are the ones we have been waiting for." Now I think, if I take that in its best possible interpretation, that's meant to emphasize that instead of waiting for somebody else to come along and do it we ourselves need to take responsibility for addressing the pressing needs of our world. But it can kind of sound kind of arrogant, can't it? Like, "We're the ones we've been waiting for!" You know, "We amaze even ourselves!" And God is saying, "No, no, no. You are not the one we have been waiting for. I am the one you have been waiting for. I Myself am the one you have been waiting for. I am the one who is going to be your Shepherd, your King, your Savior, your Restorer, your Blessor. I'm going to do that Myself. I'm not delegating that."

## **THE LORD JUDGES HIS PEOPLE**

And then, fifth, the Lord's judgment turns to His own people. Look in verses 17 to 19. And He judges selfish sheep. You see, the problem wasn't just among the court and king and priests. Yes, the ruling class in general was oppressive, but there was oppression going on, there was injustice going on between sheep and sheep in Israel. And so the Lord says, in verses 17 to 19, "I am going to judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats." Does that sound familiar to you? I think I remember someone speaking of the final judgment in terms of separating the sheep and the goats. You know where that comes from? That comes from right here. God is talking about establishing justice — punishing the wicked; blessing those who have been unjustly oppressed.

## THE LORD WILL GIVE HIS PEOPLE A SHEPHERD

And then, in verses 20 to 24 He says, "I'm going to appoint a successor to David." Look especially at verse 23. "I will set up over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd." So God is saying He is going to give His people a shepherd, a servant, a prince like David, but better. But hold on! In verses 11 to 16 He said, "I'm going to be your King. I'm going to be your Shepherd. No more appointees." And in verses 20 to 24, He says, "I'm going to appoint a shepherd, a servant, a prince like David, only better." And so you've got to ask, "Which one is it? God, are You going to be the Shepherd of Your people or are You going to appoint a shepherd of Your people? Which is it?" Now you all, because you're smart and you know your Bibles know the answer to that question is, "Yes! I am your King, I am your Shepherd, and I'm going to appoint a servant, a shepherd, a prince who's better than David." And only Jesus can help you understand how those things come together. And that's why we read John chapter 10 this morning. You were wondering, "Where was Jeremiah?" And I thought to myself this week, "I just can't do Jeremiah to them on Christmas Sunday!" And I thought, "John 10 is perfect for this passage. We'll get back to Jeremiah next week!" So we read John 10 today and that's why.

But before we get there, we need to look at one last section of this passage. Look at verses 25 to 31. Here's the seventh thing. The Lord will establish His covenant of peace. Now peace here doesn't just mean cessation of hostility, it means total wellbeing, the optimal condition for human flourishing. And God is saying, "I'm going to establish, I'm going to bring about a covenant that will mean wellbeing for all my people. I'm going to do this through this shepherd, servant, prince who is a successor to David, who is to come." And the results, He explains here in verses 25 to 31, are going to be two-fold. Look at what He says.

First, verse 27 and verse 30. "They shall know that I am the LORD" — verse 27. And again verse 30 — "They shall know that I am the LORD." I don't know how many times Ezekiel says that; some of you may know. It's at least fifty times in the book. It's one of the great themes of the book that, "You will know that I am the Lord." So one of the results of God being the Shepherd and God providing this servant is that they are really going to have an experiential knowledge of God as God. They're going to understand, "God, I belong to You. I'm Your people and You are my God. No more going after false gods. No more looking for God in all the wrong places. No longer seeking treasure in anything, everything but God Himself, but finally finding in God the Lord that we have been looking for." "You will know that I am the Lord when I have done this."

But the second effect is this. It is total well-being. They will experience total wellbeing. He calls it a covenant of peace. And did you catch the words of verse 26? "I will send down showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing." You wondered where that old Gospel song was from, "There will be showers of



blessing?” There it is; it's Ezekiel 34. God is saying, “I will shower you with total well-being.” That's what the Biblical word, shalom, or peace means. “I'm going to shower you with peace and total well-being.” But how does that all go together? God's going to be the Shepherd; He's going to appoint a shepherd.

Turn with me in your Bibles to the gospel of Luke. And in Luke chapter 2, allow your eyes to fall upon verses 8 to 20. And you know what this is. It's the story of the birth of Jesus. And who is the first group of people ever to hear someone say, “Merry Christmas”? Shepherds. Now isn't that interesting? Shepherds. “There were shepherds abiding their fields and watching the flocks by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord appeared unto them and said, ‘Fear not, for I bring good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For today unto you in the city of David is born a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.’ And then with the angel appears a multitude of the heavenly host.” And listen, my friends, what do they sing? “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace.” Now isn't that interesting? Shepherds are greeted with a message of peace from angels about a Davidic king who is going to be born in a manger. If that isn't mind blowing, I don't know what is mind blowing.

And then if you'll turn with me to John 10, because you're still saying, “I still don't understand how God is the King and how God appoints a king. If God's going to be the King, if God's going to be the Shepherd Himself and He's going to appoint someone who is the shepherd, how does that work?” Well Billy read verses 1 to 21 because that's what I asked him to read but I held back. I was sneaky; I held back just a few verses that I wanted you to see. Look at verse 27. John 10 verse 27: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.” Now Jesus uses the shepherd imagery constantly in His teaching. He's the good Shepherd, He tells us in this passage, who cares for the sheep. He's the one who goes after the one out of a hundred sheep that wanders away and brings them back to the other ninety-nine. And in this passage He says, “I am the good shepherd and I won't lose any of the sheep. I won't lose the sheep, the Father can't lose the sheep, because I and the Father are one.” How is it that God Himself can be our King and Shepherd and He can appoint one to be our shepherd? Because the one that He appointed is God, God in the flesh. “I and the Father are one.” God appointed God to be our Shepherd in Jesus. And that's what the Christmas story is about. The Shepherd we need is God and God has appointed the Shepherd we need and He is God. He is Jesus.

## **TRUST IN THE SHEPHERD**

Now here's my point one. My friends, what we need more than anything else this Christmas season is to believe God, to have faith in God, to put our trust in the

Shepherd that God has appointed who is God. We live in a day and time, I'm convinced, the acid of unbelief is in the air and it eats at our souls all the time. And that acid of unbelief tempts us to do exactly what the kings of Israel did. And what did they do? They didn't believe God and they sought their own devices in order to find satisfaction, success, and fulfillment. And they utterly failed. And here, today, as we prepare for Christmas two days hence, more than anything else in the world we need to believe God. What is the great message of Ezekiel 34? "I am the Lord your God and you are My people. I am the only one who can give you satisfaction, I'm the only one who can bless you, and if you look for that satisfaction and that blessing anywhere else it will evade you." We need that message today, in this modern world, as much or more than the kings of Israel of old or the people in exile needed that message. And we need to believe. May God grant us belief in the Shepherd that He appointed who is Himself. Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, thank You for this word to us. We pray that You would bless it to our hearts and that we would believe by the work of Your Holy Spirit. Now grant that the praises that we sing would come to You from the depths of our soul, in Jesus' name, amen.*

Would you take your hymnals in hand again and let's sing about those shepherds who were in the fields abiding, watching their flocks by night, using number 223.

Let me remind you to take your bulletins because you are the choir singing the response today. We'll sing one stanza of the refrain of, "O Come, Let Us Adore Him" so be ready for that right after the benediction.

Now receive God's blessing. Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus, the Messiah. Amen.

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