

The Faithful Shepherd

Ezekiel 34:20–31, Hebrews 13:20–21

This fall, as we prepare to choose another ruling elder, we have been focusing on what the Bible teaches concerning the church and its officers. Last week we looked at the first part of Ezekiel 34, where the prophet delivers the LORD's verdict against unfaithful shepherds—men such as the Levites, whose job was to feed the sheep, but some of them misused their office in order to enrich themselves. What did God think of this? The prophet is clear: “Thus says the Lord GOD . . . ‘*Woe* to the shepherds of Israel who feed *themselves*!’” (v. 2).

Woe is an interjection used to express grief or distress, but clearly in this context it is used to warn of impending judgment. Consider similar usage in Isaiah, written about the same time.

“*Woe* unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isa. 5:20). Good and evil are categories established by God, based upon his infallible word. Those who seek to muddy them and change them will be judged.

“*Woe* unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!” (Isa. 5:21). Those who approach God must be humble and remember that they are but men.

“*Woe* unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed” (Isa. 10:1). Lawmakers who enact unjust laws cannot escape the judgment of God.

Or consider the word of our Lord: “*Woe* unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation” (Matt. 23:14). Misuse of spiritual authority angers God.

So in Ezekiel 34:2 we have the phrase “*Woe* to the shepherds of Israel who feed *themselves*!” Here, the prophet pronounces God's woe—God's judgment—upon false teachers who misuse spiritual office in an effort to enrich themselves. It is bad enough to deceive people and go after their money under false pretenses, but to do so in the name of *religion*—in the name of the God of heaven—is a compound offense. It is not only stealing—taking money from God's people, and failing to teach them God's truth, but added to this, it is also to take the holy name of God in vain—bringing shame upon the true faith, giving the impression that the true religion is just a money-making operation.

This, of course, is not unknown in our own day. There are well-known TV preachers who have concluded that religion is a means of financial gain.¹ In contrast to the Lord Jesus Christ, who was born to humble parents and lived a life

¹ Cf. 1 Tim. 6:5 NASB 1995 footnote.

of poverty during his earthly ministry, never owning a home—never having two outer garments—there are religious teachers today who falsely claim that God wants all his people rich, and that if you are not rich, it is because you do not have enough faith. Jesus did not have luxury homes. He did not jet around in a private jet, but strode along the dusty roads of Palestine. Speaking of himself, he said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.”² His disciples—Peter, James and John and the others—did not follow their Lord to get *rich*, but to get *wisdom*, and anyone who repackages Jesus’ words in order to snooker people out of their hard-earned money will come under his righteous wrath at last. They may be living on Easy Street now, but one day they will stand before the Lord, the righteous judge.

This is not to imply that *all* the priests and Levites of Ezekiel’s time were corrupt. There was a faithful remnant to be sure. Ezekiel himself was part of this remnant, as were the other Old Testament prophets and men such as Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth, and Simeon, who was “just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.”³ But the majority of the Jewish teachers at the time of Christ rejected him. They said, “Take this Man and crucify him. Give us Barabbas. We will *not* have this man to rule over us.” They didn’t want the Son of God when he appeared, because they were afraid that if they received him, the Romans would come and take away their place and their nation. They would be out of a job. They would rather have their cushy jobs and the adoration of the crowds than recognize the Jesus as the long-promised Messiah.

And so it is to this day. The Jews, having rejected Christ, having said, “His blood be on us and on our children,” are not about to admit their mistake and say, “We were wrong. Jesus of Nazareth really *did* fulfil the prophecies of Old Testament Scripture, he really was the heaven-sent Messiah. He is the true and only Savior; we will put our trust in him.” No, they won’t, for to do so would involve admitting that they and their rabbis were wrong. They’ve got too much invested in their rejection of Christ to change at this late date. They are more concerned to have the approval of their fellow co-religionists than to have the approval of the living God at the last day. They do not honor the Son, the only Savior, so they do not honor the Father either. According to the teaching of Jesus Christ they do *not* worship the God of heaven. Jews and Christians do *not* worship the same God, though differently (a lot of dispensationalist Christians believe this). But hear Jesus’ words: “He that honoreth not the Son honoreth not the Father which hath sent him” (John 5:23). This is the Word of God, the Holy Bible. This is the teaching of the Christian faith from the mouth of the only One whose opinion really matters. If you believe in the One true and living God, then you believe in

² Matt. 8:20, Luke 9:58

³ Luke 2:25

his Christ. If you reject the Christ, then you absolutely do not believe in the one only living and true God. You are bound for eternity in hell, unless you repent.

What about you? Are you a follower of God, and of his Christ? Do you worship the God who sent his Son to be your Savior? If you do not, then, according to Scripture, you are an idolator, worshiping a god of your own imaginations—a god who doesn't exist, who cannot save, whose devotees will spend eternity in the lake of fire.

The stakes are high. *Today* is the day of salvation. You have no assurance that there will be a tomorrow. To die without Christ will seal your fate eternally. Come to Christ. Confess your sins. Profess faith in him. Jesus truly said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." He said it because it is true. Anyone who tries to come to God in any other way will perish. This was also the teaching of the apostles. Peter wisely concluded, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." The Lord Jesus is the exclusive way to God. This is too narrow-minded for modern man, but it is the truth. To believe such will not win you the acclaim of liberal Christianity—or of academia, or of the social-media influencers—but it pleases the God of heaven, whose truth it is. You have a choice: follow Christ and become his worshiper, or reject him and be the object of his wrath eternally. This is the truth of Scripture and the testimony of the faithful church. There is no getting around it.

The unfaithful shepherds of Ezekiel's day rejected the teaching of Holy Scripture and came under the Lord's "woe." And unfaithful shepherds ever since do the same. It is required of teachers in the church to teach the truth—even if it is unpopular, even if their churches are small. Faithfulness to God is the wisest thing—the safest course.

As I said last week, all God's people—all of you who sit in the pews—need to know how to discern faithful teaching that accords with Holy Scripture, so that you can hold your pastors and elders accountable to teach the pure Word of God. When a minister in our church teaches the Bible, his teaching is subject to review by presbytery. If he teaches false doctrine, he can be removed from office. This is a protection and safeguard in being a member of a faithful Presbyterian or Reformed church. In many churches today, false teachers cannot be removed—there is no mechanism for doing so. Other churches that *have* such a mechanism fail to use it, and allow false teachers to continue spreading their humanistic teachings. The believer in Jesus Christ has a moral obligation to leave a false church and unite with a true church. How can such a church be identified? As summarized in the Belgic Confession, "The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church

discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head.”⁴

My dear hearer, if you know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, you have a moral obligation to speak out. If you fail to speak out against false teachers, then you are part of the problem. O saint of God, be valiant for truth! Being right with God is more important than being popular with your contemporaries.

So in the first part of our chapter the Lord GOD finds fault with unfaithful shepherds, but in the second part—our focus today—he promises that he will send the faithful Shepherd. Addressing unfaithful shepherds, he says: “Because you have pushed with side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad, therefore *I will save* My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and *I will judge* between sheep and sheep. *I will establish* one shepherd over them, and he shall *feed* them—My servant David. He shall feed them and be their *shepherd*. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David a prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. I will make a covenant of peace with them”

Notice carefully: the God of heaven, the Lord GOD (Hebrew: Adonai Yahweh), having found fault with the unfaithful shepherds of Israel who were the majority at the time of Ezekiel, promises to do something about it. He says, “*I will save* my flock.” The word “save” used in this text is the second element of the word *Joshua* (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ) which comes into the New Testament as *Jesus* (Heb. יֵשׁוּעַ), a later form of יְהוֹשֻׁעַ,⁵ which means *Yahweh saves*. As the Angel of the Lord said to Joseph, the husband of Mary, “Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall *save* his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21)—literally: thou shalt call his name Jesus (Yahweh *saves*), for he shall *save* his people from their sins. Jesus is Yahweh in human flesh. Jesus, the divine Son of David, *saves, judges, feeds* and *shepherds* his people. The New Testament begins: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, *the son of David*, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). Make no mistake: the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of David the king, who comes to save his people.

If you are born again, if God’s Holy Spirit has given you a new heart which loves him and understands his truth, then this truth resonates with you. You don’t *want* to save yourself (an impossibility anyway). You want *the Lord* to save you. You don’t want any credit for your own salvation. You want all the credit and all the glory to go to the Lord Jesus Christ. You love God, you love his truth and you love his gospel. You wouldn’t want it any other way.

Unfaithful shepherds have abused the teaching office that was meant to bless God’s people, but this has not escaped the heavenly Father’s notice, and now he

⁴ Belgic Confession, art. 29, <https://threeforms.org/the-belgic-confession/>

⁵ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, Ἰησοῦς (p. 374 of the print edition)

promises not only to remedy the situation and send faithful shepherds, but preeminently to come *himself*. Here is a prophecy of the coming of the Christ in human flesh to personally shepherd his people. Jesus, the divine Son of David, saves, judges, feeds and shepherds his people.

He “saves” us. He saves us from sin, death, hell and the devil. Before we were born again we ran from God. We were like sheep going astray. Now, having been subdued by the Holy Spirit of God, we have returned to the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25). Like Mary of Bethany, our desire is to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn of him and be his faithful worshipers.

He “judges” us. He convicts us of sin. His Spirit judges the thoughts and intents of our heart. We gladly pray with David in Psalm 139, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: *try* me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” We don’t want to judge according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment (John 7:24). The law of Christ is the standard of what is right and what is wrong. We want to “[cast] down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and [bring] into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ,” because he is the one who judges everything truly.

He “feeds” us. Proverbs 30 teaches us to pray, “Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; *feed me with food convenient for me.*” Isaiah 40 promises: “He shall *feed his flock* like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.” Peter teaches, “As newborn babes, desire the sincere *milk* of the word, that ye may grow thereby.” Newborn babies don’t know a lot of things, but they do know when they are hungry! If a hungry baby is crying, he wants one thing—his mother’s breast. You can pick him up, you can cuddle him, you can try to distract him, but he is single-minded. There’s one thing he wants, and that is food. He will be inconsolable until he gets it. You and I should be as single-minded as babies, wanting our souls to be satisfied with the pure milk of the Word.

He “shepherds” us (“He shall feed them *and be their shepherd*”). What do shepherds do? They lead their flock into green pastures. Shepherding is a hands-on job. Shepherds in the Middle East live with their sheep, they know their sheep, they want the best for their sheep. If we are Christ’s sheep, then we follow him. “As many as are *led* by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14). Are you led by the Spirit of God? Are you his willing follower?

Here, then, is Christ, the faithful shepherd. He saves, judges, feeds and shepherds his people. And we, his people, are blessed. We want to stay by his side forever. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

The Lord GOD pronounces his woe upon the unfaithful shepherds of Israel who failed to feed his sheep the pure truth of his word. Faithful pastors are Christ's *gift* to his church, pointing people to Christ and assisting them to grow in grace and service to his kingdom,⁶ but the unfaithful shepherds of Israel were not teaching the Word but were concerned only for their own self-advancement. But the Lord GOD of heaven—the true “Shepherd of Israel”⁷ took pity on his sheep. As we read in Ezekiel 34:11, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.’” The phrase “I Myself” (הֵנָּה יְהוָה) is emphatic. God's appointed undershepherds have failed, so now he himself will search for his sheep and seek them until he finds them. Here is a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ. When he came to this earth he plainly said: “The Son of man is come to *seek* and to *save* that which was lost.”⁸

Christ, the Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, who took on human flesh and came to earth so he could die on the cross for his people's sins, is the true Shepherd of Israel. He is the good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. If you look to him in faith, then you are his child and his sheep. He shows his love for you by taking you as a part of his flock, protecting you from the devil and feeding you with the truth of his Word. You should seek out a faithful, gospel-preaching church with faithful undershepherds who point you to Christ and teach you his gospel. The way the church does this is through faithful worship and faithful preaching. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16). A faithful church teaches and sings the word of Christ—the truth of Holy Scripture. A faithful minister *teaches* the Word, and a faithful congregation *sings* the Word. The born-again Christian loves the preaching of the Word and loves to sing to the Lord. The Bible specifically says, “Sing the Psalms.” The Psalms are a big book. Most churches—even many good churches—fail to sing the Psalms. A lot of churches today feature performance music—the upbeat, catchy tunes of pop Christian culture. The book of Psalms is the largest, longest book in the Bible. According to one count, there are 42,704 words in its English translation. How many churches try to sing all of them? How many do *you* know? Most Christians' knowledge of the Psalms is quite impoverished. A faithful church sings the Psalms, as well as hymns that faithfully express the truth of Scripture. It also has faithful preaching that points people to Christ, the only Savior. Such preaching, teaching and singing may not be popular, but is our aim to please men, or God?

⁶ Eph. 4:8ff.

⁷ Ps. 80

⁸ Luke 19:10

Since the unfaithful shepherds of Israel have failed their people, the God of heaven will personally seek out his sheep and become their “true shepherd.”

The Hebrews benediction, read before this sermon, identifies Jesus as “that great *shepherd* of the sheep” and is a fitting conclusion to this sermon: “Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, *that great shepherd of the sheep*, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”