

We are into our third week examining, "The Good Shepherd". We started with the well-known and much-loved Psalm 23 which is a detailed and complete picture of God, the Good Shepherd who cares and provides. Last week we followed Jeremiah's portrayal of the Good Shepherd who cares, provides **AND offers HOPE**.¹

Jeremiah was a prophet and a creative theologian who was inspired by the Holy Spirit to boldly tell the Hebrew nation, the fall of the city of Jerusalem was not a failure on God's part; it was entirely due to their unfaithfulness towards God. As we unpacked Jeremiah's message, we noted, **we are what we remember** and we left with a challenge to remember the goodness, greatness and Holiness of God, instead of remembering the failure of human beings, which might have caused us, or someone else, personal misery, hurt or pain.

Today we look at Ezekiel, a younger contemporary of Jeremiah, whose name means "(May) God strengthen", who speaks to the Hebrew nation after the fall of Jerusalem, when they are in exile.

Ezekiel was a priest, but God called him to a career as a prophet that was primarily political, not religious. God gave him a vision² which included political symbols such as chariot wheels³, an army⁴, a throne⁵ and a sentinel⁶, but no religious symbols. We tend to think God calls people from secular professions into mission and ministry, at home or abroad, but Ezekiel's story should convince us that, with God, the opposite is also true.

As a priest, Ezekiel is deeply concerned with the absolute Holiness of God, that the wrong/sin of his fellow humans, should not offend God's very character.

¹ Jeremiah 23:1-8

² Ezekiel 1:4 - 2:8

³ Ezekiel 1:16

⁴ Ezekiel 1:24

⁵ Ezekiel 1:26

⁶ Ezekiel 3:16

In exile, as captives in Babylon, the despondent and dejected mood of the Hebrew people is captured in Psalm 137, *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?*

Boney M's song, "By the Rivers of Babylon", is based on Psalm 137. It is a Rastafarian song, in the musical style of Jamaican Reggae, in which the term **Babylon** refers to a governmental system which is either oppressive or unjust. "*By the rivers of Babylon*" refers to living in a repressive society and longing for freedom, just like the Israelites in captivity. I find it fascinating that, in the middle of a song which was No 1 in the pop charts for five weeks, are the words, **Let the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart, be acceptable in thy sight here tonight.**

In their misery, their crestfallen, gloomy, depressed and dejected spirit, the Hebrew people demonstrate a typical trait of human nature: when the midst of great difficulty, blame someone else for our misfortune. *God has been unjust to us; He does not play fair; He promises one thing and then does not keep His promise; and when all the questions have been exhausted, the last one is, What have we done to deserve this? The problem is out there. I cannot be held responsible for what is happening to me.*

Ezekiel addresses God's message to two groups of people: the Hebrew people themselves, and the Shepherds who were entrusted to lead the people with the staff, and protect the people with the rod.

Through Ezekiel, God asks the Hebrew people, *You say, 'the way of the Lord is not just'. Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that not just?*⁷ Then God reminds them, **I have no pleasure in the death of anyone; so turn from your wicked ways and live.**⁸ The list of *wicked ways* is l-o-n-g, including a breakdown of the moral code, the civil/social code, the banking/economic code and the legal code of God's justice.

⁷ Ezekiel 18:26 & 29

⁸ Ezekiel 18:32

Then Ezekiel turns on the Shepherds of Israel, those in positions of leadership, whose God-given duty was a singleminded focus on the flock under their care, **providing** for them, **guiding** them, and ensuring their **safety**. As a contrast to the **good shepherd**, Ezekiel exposes the bad shepherds⁹, Israel's leaders who could be charged with dereliction of duty. He sketches out in vivid terms, what it looked like when leaders failed to provide this care. These leaders were "*slaughtering sheep*" for their own gain instead of feeding them; treating them with "force and severity" instead of caring for them, and not guiding and leading them, which was Ezekiel's most severe rebuke of the shepherds.

When leaders abandon their duty of care, the sheep are scattered, they become lost, and prey to beasts and wild animals. The sheep not only have no one to care for them, provide them green pastures and keep them safe, there was no one to **go out and look for them and bring them back!**

In Psalm 23 we read about the Good Shepherd who **cares**; in Jeremiah we read about the Good Shepherd who **offers hope**. Here in Ezekiel we are introduced to the Good Shepherd who **leads**.

The task of a leader is only to provide and care for those under his care, and keep them safe from harm, danger and accident; all of these are important. The difference between an leader and a good leader, an ordinary shepherd and a good shepherd, is that the good leader/shepherd knows each sheep individually and guides them according each one's ability and need.

When Ezekiel has finished rebuking the shepherds of Israel for their shameful failure to lead the people as God would have them,¹⁰ God interjects, *I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out*. God then paints a beautiful picture of the Good Shepherd searching for and restoring sheep who have been scattered and lost.

⁹ Ezekiel 34

¹⁰ Ezekiel 34:1-10

The Good Shepherd will return the sheep to the land and feed them on the mountains; He will give them rest on rich pastures and **they** will feed themselves. The Good Shepherd will bandage the injured, and strengthen the sick, **but** at the same time, God will execute judgment not only on the leaders for their dereliction duty, but also on individual members of the flock, some of whom are i teetered only in self-gain, as modelled by the leaders.

There is one more thing to be added to the picture of being led by the Good Shepherd, to be restored to good health, to be revitalised in a sound mind, to be renewed in the relationship with the Good Shepherd, which is, the Good Shepherd does all this to gather His **entire** flock which includes Israel **AND** everyone else.

Remember the promise God made to Abraham? We have look at this on several occasions. *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, **so that you will be a blessing.** I will bless those who bless you and those who dishonour you, I will curse, **and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.***¹¹

The Good Shepherd leads His sheep: everyone who knows Him, recognises His voice and willingly follows. This includes us.

There is a final subtle message here which is easy to miss. We are individual sheep in God's pasture, but we are also part of the flock. If we follow the Good Shepherd because we know Him and trust Him, we must be conscious that there are others in the flock who might not know the Good Shepherd as well as we do! They need to follow Him as we do, and how will they do that?

When they see our enthusiasm and vigour, our commitment and devotion to follow the leading of the Good Shepherd, they too will follow.

Its not about me-and-the-good-shepherd. Its about making sure we ALL follow the Good Shepherd, where He leads.

AMEN

¹¹ Genesis 12:2, 3