

Nov. 16, 2014 – Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 (Epistle: 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46)

Christ the King is the Good Shepherd who personally saves His straying sheep.

In Ezekiel 34:11-12 the Lord GOD says “*Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day.*” You see the words “My sheep” and “My flock” throughout our reading today. It is His sheep that God will deliver on that day. This leads to the question: “How do you become one of God’s sheep?”

By nature we are not God’s sheep – we are not part of His flock. We are born separated from God and alienated from Him because we are born sinful. And left to ourselves, we only stray further. As the prophet Isaiah said: “*All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way*” (Isaiah 53:6a).

It seems that whenever the Bible talks about sheep, they are lost and need to be found. When Jesus saw the crowds, “*He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd*” (Matthew 9:35). But that is precisely why He came: to seek and to save the lost. He came as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:9).

While “*all we like sheep have gone astray*” that isn’t the end of the story. The prophet Isaiah continues: “*And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all*” (Isaiah 53:6b). All your sins have been laid on Jesus Christ, the Shepherd who became one of the sheep. He did not stray, but lived a perfect life in your place. He then laid down His life and died on the cross to pay for the sins of the world and to reconcile the world to God. He rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven to rule as our King and to be our Shepherd forever.

Through trust in Jesus’ death to pay for your sins and in His perfect life to satisfy God’s law for you, you become one of God’s sheep. As we read in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, we are also to believe and trust in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. It is the basis for our resurrection: “*For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive*” (1 Corinthians 15:21-22). Because Jesus rose from the dead, we will rise as well.

Jesus is the only way. He is THE way, THE truth, and THE life (John 14:6a). Jesus said, “*No one comes to the Father except through Me*” (John 14:6b). In addition to being the Good Shepherd, Jesus also said that He is “*the door of the sheep*” (John 10:7): “*I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture*” (John 10:9). So believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved (Acts 16:31).

This does not mean, however, that you are saved *because* of your faith. God makes it clear that we cannot believe of our own power. It must be granted to us by God (see Philippians 1:29). It is not something we can decide to do. Jesus said: “*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him*” (John 6:44). He told His disciples: “*You did not choose Me, but I chose you*” (John 15:16).

This is why God, through Ezekiel, says “My sheep” and “My flock”. They are God’s. He has chosen them. He has elected them and “*will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land*” (v. 13). Jesus said that at His coming

“He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matthew 24:31).

You are God’s sheep because God chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world and predestined you to adoption as sons (Ephesians 1:4-5).

So we see how we become God’s sheep from two different perspectives: ours and God’s. God shows us both for our comfort and encouragement. We can get into trouble, however, if we go beyond what God says of each.

We go beyond what God says if we make our faith the reason for our salvation. One’s lack of faith condemns a person and it is their own fault. God says, *“he who does not believe is condemned...because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God”* (John 3:18). But, as I explained, this does not mean that we are responsible for our faith. We cannot believe ourselves. Faith comes from God; our salvation is a gift by grace. You have faith because God chose you, not the other way around. God did not elect you because God looked ahead and saw that you would believe.

On the other hand, to say that those who do not believe were predestined by God to condemnation goes against what God says. He *“desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (Timothy 2:4).

The problem comes in when we focus on ourselves or God’s election and forget what connects them: the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. God does not point us to our faith, but to the object of our faith: His only begotten Son. God tell us that *“He chose [us] in Him before the foundation of the world”* (Ephesians 1:4). It is in Christ that these two viewpoints come together. We should fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrew 5:9).

From our perspective, we have the sure promise that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but will have everlasting life (John 3:16). Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16). These promises give us comfort and hope, as we look to Jesus in faith and trust in what He has done.

From God’s perspective, we are told that He chose us in Christ. This also gives us comfort and hope, because your salvation is not dependent on you, but on God. It is dependent on the election of Him who desired all to be saved and on the objective truth of what He has done in sending His Son to take away the sins of the world.

In Christ God has made you a part of His flock. Through Ezekiel, God gives us a glorious picture of what this means – of what it means to be God’s sheep and what it means for God to be our Shepherd.

In ancient times rulers were often called shepherds or described as shepherding their people. I doubt, however, that any of them actually did the work themselves. The title merely indicated that under their rule the people were taken care of.

The Lord GOD, however, is not a distant king who simply uses others to carry out his work. Here God emphatically says, *“Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out”* (v. 11). *“I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down”* (v. 15). *“I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away...”* (v. 16). This emphasis isn’t always carried over in our English translations, but it is there. God Himself does the work. He gets involved. Jesus became man and lived among us (John 1:14). He was not afraid to “get His hands dirty.” He came as the Good Shepherd to seek you, His lost sheep, and even to shed His blood for you.

On the last day God Himself will gather all His sheep from wherever they have been scattered – from all peoples and countries. He will bring us to our own land, here called the “mountains of Israel” (v. 13-14). God will bring us to a pasture that is good and rich. One where we will live in peace and safety, up in the high mountains away from all the evils and dangers we face in this world.

God tells us He will feed His flock. The word translated as “feed” through out this passage literally means “to shepherd”. While it does include giving food, it goes beyond that. It encompasses all the work involved in being a shepherd – like leading the sheep to good pasture, protecting them from every danger, and keeping them from straying. All these things God Himself will do.

God also tells us that we “*shall lie down in a good fold*” (v. 14) and that He “*will make [us] lie down*” (v. 15). Isn’t that such a beautiful picture? – to lie down in a green field without any worries, without any cares.

Do you ever get tired of all the work you have to do? Even in retirement there can be a lot one has to do: cooking, cleaning, raking, mowing, fixing, painting – the list goes on and on. You may even enjoy doing some of these things, but they get old, don’t they? They become work. Sometimes even just getting out of bed seems to be a chore.

But it will not be so on “*the high mountains of Israel*”. God will make you lie down and give you rest from your labor. This does not mean that heaven will be boring. Our inheritance in heaven will not grow old or fade away. It will not lose its luster. You will not be bored in God’s rest but you will enjoy rest from all your labor (see Hebrews 4:10).

God also says that He will “*bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick*” (v. 16). Here on earth we experience various health problems. We face hardships of many kinds and can be broken in many ways. But all that will be a thing of the past! God Himself will tend to your wounds and restore your health. He will fix any brokenness. In Revelation 21:4 we are told that “*God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.*”

God will also “right every wrong.” He warns that He will judge between the fat and the lean sheep, and destroy the fat and the strong (v. 16). These are those who “*have pushed with side and shoulder; butted all the weak ones with [their] horns, and scattered them*” (v. 21) These are sheep who do not belong to God’s flock (v. 22) but who trampled God’s sheep and focused on themselves in this life here on earth.

Sometimes that may seem to be a description of us. But God has saved you and forgiven all your sins because of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for His sheep. And God will save us, His flock, so that we will no longer be prey (v. 22). We will be saved from all those who would do us harm. We will be delivered not only from those of the world, but also from Satan and his evil angels who seek to destroy us, and from our sinful nature and its lusts which war against our souls.

God will also establish one shepherd over us – His servant David. This Shepherd will not be King David from the Old Testament, but his descendant, the Son of David: Jesus Christ the King of kings and Lord of lords. He will be the perfect Pastor – as “pastor” is just the Latin word for “shepherd”. He will pastor us, His flock, and will dwell among us forever.

That last part is very important. In order for a shepherd to do his work he has to be among his sheep. And that is what will happen. God Himself will dwell with us. He proclaims this in Reve-

lation 21:3 with a loud voice: *“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.”*

Praise be to Christ the King, the Good Shepherd, who came to save us, His straying sheep. He is coming again to bring us to the good and rich pasture where He will dwell among us and be our perfect Shepherd forever.

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