

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Ezekiel 34:11-24 *For thus says the Lord GOD: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. ¹² "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. ¹³ "And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴ "I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ "I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down," says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ "I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment." ¹⁷ *And as for you, O My flock, thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats. ¹⁸ "Is it too little for you to have eaten up the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture-- and to have drunk of the clear waters, that you must foul the residue with your feet? ¹⁹ "And as for My flock, they eat what you have trampled with your feet, and they drink what you have fouled with your feet." ²⁰ *Therefore thus says the Lord GOD to them: "Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat and the lean sheep. ²¹ "Because you have pushed with side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad, ²² "therefore I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³ "I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them-- My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ "And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David a prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.***

It's rarely a surprise to us when scandals are uncovered and dominate the news cycle. We've grown accustomed to people in power abusing their positions of authority. Whether it be politicians, or hedge fund managers, or college coaches—when we find out that certain powerful individuals were using their power for their own pleasure and the abuse of others, it's very sad, but it's not at all shocking. Because all mankind is sinful, all mankind is corrupt! And power just seems to exacerbate that corruption, giving more avenues for our sinful abuse. This truth goes hand-in-hand with the old adage, "Might makes right." The person who determines right and wrong, the person whose will is done, that's usually the person who has the most power, the most might.

God warned the children of Israel about these truths when they began asking Him to give them a king like the rest of the nations of the world had. God warned them that a king would take their sons and make them fight, he'd take their daughters as his servants, he'd take a tenth of their flocks, a tenth of their harvest—they wouldn't be his people as much as they'd be his slaves! And yet, the people responded, ***"There shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles."*** (1 Samuel 8:19-20)

They did get a king as they requested, and for the next 500 years, Israel was ruled by kings, and you probably already know how that turned out for them. And if you can't remember what those kings were like, Ezekiel reminds us in the verses leading up to our sermon text: ***"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.” (Ezekiel 34:3-5)

The Kings of Israel were, in general, evil kings, only interested in serving themselves, and sadly, even the priests and spiritual leaders acted the same. All those who had been appointed to positions of power had abused it and had adopted the mindset of “MY might makes right.”

In that last verse which I just read, it said that the sheep had been scattered and became food for the wild beasts. That’s picturing the situation the Israelites found themselves in. The people that Ezekiel is preaching to here in our text were no longer in their own land, no longer had their own king, even. By this time, they were living in captivity under the rule of the Babylonian empire. It’s in this context that Ezekiel speaks, preaching to a people who had been abused by their leaders, preaching to a people who were now being held prisoner—and he’s also preaching to you and me. And his message is simple. In the words of our theme:

Rejoice! For Christ’s Might Makes Right

Ezekiel gives us great imagery in our text of sheep, but it’s not the quaint, peaceful image of sheep grazing in a field. Rather, Ezekiel describes those sheep who take the good water and eat the good grass and then trample in it afterwards before any other sheep can enjoy them, of rams headbutting others with their horns so they can plow through the crowd. It’s a picture of oppression, of people with the idea of “Might makes right” ruling over those who are weak. We’re surrounded by just that in our sinful world. Just as a husband beats his wife, or a wife ridicules her husband, or a bully torments smaller students, or a powerful nation imposes its will on impoverished nations—the whole world, which is oppressed and under the imprisonment of the devil, also oppresses everyone it can at any opportunity.

As Christians in this sinful world, we might feel that oppression as well, especially in a country that seeks to silence the teachings of God’s Word more and more each day. But before we pull out our victim cards and start feeling sorry for ourselves as if thinking, “*THOSE* people are the oppressors! And we’re the ones being trampled and scattered. We’re the ones getting the leftovers!”—consider what the Lord says in verse 17, “***As for YOU my flock...***” All of those illustrations of sheep oppression which follow include you. You are included in the oppressors. You! Because you have eaten up the good pasture, because *YOU* have pushed through with the shoulder.

It may be in smaller ways, but you and I are both guilty of oppressing one another. Maybe it’s simply in rushing to get somewhere ahead of someone else, so that you’re there first, or so that you get the best choice before anyone else gets the opportunity. Or maybe it’s simply not stopping to think about what’s best for someone else, not going to the greatest lengths you can to make sure you’re doing what’s in the greatest spiritual and physical interests of those around you, and instead thinking of yourself first. Or maybe it’s in arguing your own opinions and refusing to listen to anyone else until others are forced to agree, because you won’t have it any other way and everyone has to agree that you are correct. These and many other examples that we could come up with show that we are like those fat sheep and rams, trampling the good water, pushing one another around. We are shoving our way through the crowd, crying out, “MY might makes right.”

As we do this, as we make busy oppressing one another, as we are guilty of using our power and

influence largely only for our *own* good, we are actually bringing ourselves under a different kind of oppression, one far worse. For Jesus said in the Gospel of John, **“Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”** (John 8:34) That’s where we find ourselves: enslaved by our own selfish, me-first actions. We are captured by our sins, doomed to die. In our effort to get the best spots, we’ve put ourselves in the worst position possible. After all, God says in our text, **“I will destroy the fat and the strong sheep.”**

So Ezekiel paints this picture of sheep and shepherds, but there’s nothing pleasant about it. The shepherds are killing and eating the sheep, the sheep are not just jostling but shoving one another and stomping in each other’s water. And that’s where this imagery might have ended, sad and hopeless, and we lumped in with the rest, resigned to the slaughter.

But when the situation seems most hopeless, out comes this ray of hope. God speaks through Ezekiel to reassure us that He’s coming not only to judge and destroy, but also to insert Himself into this picture. If you skim through our text, there’s about 20 times where God shows how *He Himself* is going to do something about all this oppression. *He’s* going to do something to set us free from our oppression under sin. Just skimming through the text, **“I myself will search for my sheep. . . I will seek out my sheep. . . I will rescue them. . . I will bring them out. . . I will feed them. . . I myself will be the shepherd. . . I myself will make them lie down. . . I will bring back the strayed”**—it goes on and on. In a few places He literally says in Hebrew, **“Behold ME!”** Basically, **“Watch what I’M going to do!”**

And we’re able to watch. We can see how He accomplishes all these promises in the person of Jesus Christ. Notice what’s going on here: this is God talking, Jehovah God is telling us that He would come down and be our shepherd, that He Himself would be the one to get His hands dirty. But then in v. 23-24, God says that He would appoint His servant David to be this shepherd. It almost sounds like He’s changed His mind and thought better of doing the work Himself, but that’s not it. This isn’t King David, that God’s referring to here. In fact, by the time this Prophecy is given to Ezekiel, King David has already been dead for about 500 years. No, this servant David the Shepherd of God’s people would be Jesus—David’s Son yet David’s Lord, the one who was born in the city of David because He was in David’s family.

So God’s not suddenly backing out of the picture, instead, He’s saying, **“If you want something done right, you gotta do it yourself. I will come down, and I myself will stand in the midst of my sheep, and I will be shepherd.”** He’s talking about Jesus, the Son of God, true God Himself. This is Jesus, the one who spoke from heaven in our New Testament reading, saying, **“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last.”** (Revelation 22:13) This shepherd is Jesus—at whose death the earth shook, the sun darkened, the temple veil tore in two. He came with the full power of God to show you how, **“Might can truly make everything ALright.”**

Looking at that first chunk of our Scripture text again, God says over and over what HE was going to do, and not once does it say what the sheep are expected to do. He doesn’t say, **“I will be their shepherd, I will find them, I will feed them, and they better be good little sheep and not wander away.”** Even when the sheep wander, He says even then, He will still seek the lost and bring back the strays. Jesus’ point is that He would do EVERYTHING to bring us His flock to the perfect pastures of heaven. If He had left any part up to us, if there was even one tiny requirement left on our end that we had to fulfill in order to earn heaven, then we’d be the fat sheep headbutting our way through the crowd in a desperate charge for hell.

So, Jesus flexed His power. He showed His might as God. He used His might to make right. In one moment, on the cross, He righted all of our wrongs, taking them totally away. In one swift stroke, He

crushed death and the devil, so that we would no longer be held in captivity to them. And one by one, He sought and found you and me, the lost straying sheep, to bring us back to His flock, where he would feed us with His body and blood, where He would cause us to drink deeply of His Word and live.

And there's something else He does for us as well. It's found in verse 15, ***"I myself will make them lie down."*** There's only two ways to make a sheep lie down. You could tackle it and forcefully hold it to the ground, that's one method. The other method is to make the sheep totally content. It has to be calm in knowing that it is safe. It has to have been well fed and have enough water. It has to be convinced that it is safe from any predators. A sheep must be 100% at peace before it will lie down. And in Jesus Christ our Savior, we have that peace necessary to lie down in total contentment.

For though we here are in the midst of oppression and pain and sorrow, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, though the devil accuses us, and though our sinful flesh claws at us every single day—Christ Jesus stands in our midst. He reassures us that He's taken care of all of it. Think of that phrase from the 23rd Psalm, ***"He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies."*** When would that ever happen? Sitting down to a feast, surrounded by enemies? We could never imagine it in our world, yet this is what Jesus has done for us.

Surrounded though we are by all those who would seek to devour us, yet we have perfect peace enjoying the feast of grace our Savior provides. Because with His mighty righteousness, He has crushed the power of Satan the oppressor. He turns the jaws of death into the door of life eternal. He took away the law's grasping claw by fulfilling all of its demands in your place. On Calvary, He who was perfected offered His own soul as the perfect sacrifice to wipe out every one of your sins. He did not look down on you the sinner, He did not see the sinful, selfish actions of we, His flock, and turn His nose up at us. Instead, He had pity on you. He said, ***"Behold me! Watch this!"*** And then He stretched out His arms and breathed His last. And He rejoiced that He was able to do this. He refused to stop until every single sin was paid for, until every enemy was defeated. And He still refuses to stop until He has found every single lost and straying sheep, so that He can bring them too into His fold, that we all might be the sheep of *HIS* pasture.

So, the world uses this idea of "might makes right" as an excuse to sin. So many in power today use that power to abuse others in the pursuit of their own gain. But Christ Jesus came with all power and might, and He did not use any of it for *His* own gain, that is, other than gaining YOU for heaven. From His position of total power and strength, He allowed *Himself* to be abused and oppressed, so that through His might He could really make right. Through His might, He forgave you, He made everything alright between you and God. There's nothing left for you to do, because in this flock, our Good Shepherd has already done it all. That means that when God comes again and judges between sheep and sheep, there's no question about where you will end up. God declares, ***"I will save my flock. . . I, the Lord, have spoken!"*** Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.

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