

“From Tyranny to Theocracy”
Ezekiel 34:1-31
March 9, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

This chapter is easily divided into two sections. In the first ten verses, Ezekiel indicts the shepherds of Israel, and in the remaining verses he promises that God himself will take up the role of shepherding Israel. Who are these shepherds? It was common in Ezekiel’s day to use the word “shepherd” to refer to the king of the nation. It had long been common in Israel to do the same. So in 2 Samuel 5:2, when the tribes of Israel came to make David their king, the Lord declared concerning David, **“You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler.”**

This image of a leader as a shepherd tells us a great deal about the Bible’s view of leadership. A shepherd has two main responsibilities: to lead the sheep and to care for the sheep. He leads the flock to the green pastures and still waters where the sheep can flourish. But that is not his only duty. A shepherd must also care for each sheep, attending to its individual needs. So if a sheep wanders, he leaves the flock and goes in search of the lost sheep. If a sheep gets sick or injured, he binds up the wounds and tends to the needs of the individual sheep, that it might be healed. A leader, in the biblical view of leadership, must do more than plot the right direction. He must also know the sheep individually, that he might care for their particular needs.

Our passage this morning highlights Jesus as that perfect leader. He is, as the author of Hebrews tells us, that **“great shepherd of the sheep”** (13:20). Chapter 34 begins the good news section of Ezekiel’s prophecy. Up to this point, only prophetic words of judgment have been spoken, unbroken by any good news at all. Chapter 34 begins what one commentator calls the “Gospel according to Ezekiel.” The first good news he gives us is that God himself will be our Shepherd-King. Israel’s kings before now may have failed, but this one will not. The earthly kings have led the nation tyrannically, and as a result the nation has descended into chaos. But when God himself becomes the Shepherd-King of Israel, the result will be the Old Testament ideal of Shalom. I like commentator Christopher Wright’s summary of this chapter, which I have made the title of the sermon: “From Tyranny to Theocracy.” The good life we all long for comes only when there will be a theocracy, when the Good Shepherd will rule in our hearts and lives. So let’s look further at the portrayal of theocracy in this passage.

I. Theocracy Rejected

The first ten verses of the chapter summarize the nature of Israel’s earthly kings. Since the kings are described as shepherds, their failures are described in

the same terms. Their central flaw, and the problem at the heart of Israel as a nation, is that their kings have acted selfishly. **“Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?”** (v. 2). They got things backwards at a very foundational level—they thought that the nation existed for them, rather than the other way around. They were not there for the public, but the public was there for them. They had used the sheep instead of serving the sheep. The result of this leadership failure was that the nation fell into a state that, in the middle-eastern mind, was the most pitiful of all things. They were like sheep without a shepherd. According to verse 6, this was the reason for the exile. **“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.”** One of the chief reasons for the exile to Babylon, according to this passage, was the evil, self-centered kings of Israel. Since the monarchy was established with King Saul, Israel and Judah had a total of 43 kings. Only three of them, David, Hezekiah and Josiah, were consistently loyal to God. Another six had a mixed record of sometimes being loyal and sometimes leading the nation into sin. All the rest, a total of thirty-four kings, were consistently unfaithful to the Lord.

How had things come to such a state? To answer that question, we have to go back almost five hundred years, to the beginning of these earthly kings. 1 Samuel 8 records the beginning of the monarchy when the elders of Israel came to Samuel to ask him to appoint a king for Israel, just like the nations around them had. God speaks to Samuel and provides us with his own evaluation of this request. **“Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them”** (1 Sam. 8:7). When Israel asked for an earthly king, they were rejecting God as their king. They were rejecting the idea of a theocracy.

Notice something important about their rejection of God’s rule over them. God affirms in this passage that the problem was not with their desires, but with where they looked for the satisfaction of those desires. Sheep have basic needs that are common to all sheep. They need food, water, protection from enemies, someone to pursue them when they wander away, someone to heal them when they get sick and to bind up their wounds when they are injured. It is not wrong for sheep to want and need these things. In the next section that begins at verse 11, notice that the list of what the sheep need is identical to what we find in the first ten verses of the chapter. The difference lies in who meets those needs. Here’s what we learn from that. The way we reject God’s rule in our lives is seen in looking outside of God for our deepest needs to be met. Or to word it as the country-western song does, we are “looking for love in all the wrong places.” It is not wrong to want security, peace and meaning in life. It is not wrong to want to be loved and to love. We reject God’s rule over us when we put him in the category of irrelevance for the satisfaction of these things.

Years ago, I remember hearing a pastor tell of a teenage girl who was a member of his church and came to see him because she was distraught over

being excluded from the popular group in school. This pastor spent some time talking to her about all that she had as a believer in Jesus. She was accepted by God, possessed every spiritual blessing in Christ, was a child of the King, blessed with a reason to live this life and the promise of a bright future. He was trying to get her to see that what she really wanted deep down, to feel that she counted for something, would be met as she received by faith all that she had been given in Christ. But the point escaped her, and after listening politely to this pastor for a while, she said, "But how is all that going to help me be popular in school?" She was doing what Israel had done and what adults do all the time. She had decided that God was irrelevant to the things that mattered most in her life, and was busily looking elsewhere (in being liked by her classmates in this case) for the meeting of her deep desires. To do so is a rejection of theocracy.

II. Theocracy Promised

God comes to us with some wonderful promises to remind us that all we really want and need can be found in his reign over us. When God becomes our great Shepherd, when there is a theocracy, the Shalom that we long for will be realized. God says in verse 25, **"I will make with them a covenant of peace."** This is the Hebrew word *Shalom*, which has a much larger field of meaning than the word *peace*. In English, peace has mostly a negative background, referring primarily to the cessation of conflict. That is certainly part of Shalom, but not all of it.

The Shalom brought by our Shepherd is described in verses 25-31 of our passage. He will bring three fundamental changes that will usher in this time of shalom. First, God says he **"will banish wild beasts from the land,"** with the result that we **"may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods"** (v. 25). God will not just suppress our enemies, but utterly banish them. A search can be made for them, but it will be fruitless. They will not just be an endangered species, but an extinct one, perhaps studied in museums but nowhere able to be found in the flesh. The enemy of cancer will be banished, as will the wild beast of depression. And don't miss the second half of verse 27: **"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."** A yoke is something fastened to your body in order to force you to do something undesirable. Picture a group of galley slaves rowing in the belly of a large ship, each one with a metal band around the ankle and a chain tying him to that place. Maybe you're in a job that makes you feel like that. Or maybe the yoke for you is some self-destructive habit, over which your success has been mixed. Your warrior shepherd will come and he will break that chain like it's made of tissue paper. Notice that this promise is preceded by the words we have read many times in Ezekiel: **"they shall know that I am the Lord."** Every single time we have encountered that phrase up until now, it has appeared in a context of judgment. People will know that Jehovah is the true God when he intervenes to judge them for their evil. Now, for the first time, it is used in a context of mercy. We will fall down and worship him as the objects of his great mercy because he has broken the yoke of enslavement.

Second, this shalom will also include the transformation of our own hearts. God says in verse 26 that he will make his hill a blessing and that he will send his showers, and they will be showers of blessing. The *hill* he mentions refers to the temple, since it was located on a hill called Mt. Zion. This hill is where God is present. God's presence becomes a blessing to us only when our hearts are transformed to want him. There are many for whom being around God is not a great blessing, but the greatest curse imaginable. God must transform our hearts if his hill, his presence, is to be a blessing to us. And our hearts must be transformed if his showers are to be blessings to us. If our hearts are not humble and grateful, then God's material blessings upon us become stumbling blocks that hurt us rather than blessings that help us.

Third, God's shalom is characterized by the transformation of creation, so that the curse is removed and the earth becomes abundantly fruitful. **"The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase"** (v. 27). **"And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land"** (v. 29). I notice how holistic God is in his shalom. He provides us with emotional well-being by the security of no more enemies. He provides us with spiritual well-being by transforming our hearts to desire his presence and with physical well-being by making the earth fruitful. God knows that to prosper fully, we need all three areas to be addressed. He has already begun to do so, and will certainly complete what he has started. Such is the blessing of the theocracy he promises.

It is important to note that God says he will make a *covenant* of peace (v. 25). This is the word God uses when he wants to make it clear that he is binding himself in an absolute way to fulfill his promise. The full story of how God does that is found in the New Testament. God had promised his peace to Israel in the Old Testament if they would follow him and obey him. But they constantly failed to do so. So in the New Testament God sends his own Son to keep the human terms of this covenant in our place. Now, even though we are covenant breakers by nature, we still receive this shalom from God because we have been given every spiritual blessing in Christ.

III. Theocracy Applied

Theocracy means government by God, and I would like to make one simple application of this idea of theocracy. God calls us to seek his reign over all nations. Jesus taught us to pray for that in the Lord's Prayer, when we make the petition "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." God's shalom will only come through God's reign; so we are to seek that reign. There is a direct proportion between God's theocratic reign and peace. Heaven is a place of perfect peace simply because it is a place where God's reign is complete. Three days ago we lost a very young member of our church family. But we can have the

confidence that he is experiencing that perfected shalom God promises as he lives in the place where God's reign is complete.

But how should we go about seeking this theocracy? Let me say right up front that God would not have us seek it through coercive means. We don't need to change the U.S. Constitution to establish Christianity as the official state religion. We don't need to alter our religiously pluralistic democracy. There is a much more effective way to bring the rule of God to earth. God calls us to be a new community of people who submit ourselves to the reign of God and thus show the beauty of theocracy. There are two specific applications stemming from this.

First, we are to seek theocracy by submitting fully to God's reign in our own lives. If we really believe that God's way is the way of shalom, then we will submit ourselves to those ways. So we place ourselves under God's laws, laws which ask us to give our money, our time and our hearts to his kingdom. And we submit ourselves to his governing of our lives, which receives its truest test when things don't go as we plan. So if you've invested in Alabama's PACT plan for college tuition, and things have not gone according to your financial plans for paying for college, you submit to God's governing of your life. That was not your plan, but God will use it to draw you to himself in new and deeper ways that will bring his shalom into your life.

Second, we seek theocracy by caring for one another as God's shepherds. Even though Jesus is the Great Shepherd of the sheep, he continues to work through under-shepherds to extend his care to his flock. The pastors and elders have an official role of shepherding, but to a lesser degree we are all charged to care for one another after the pattern of Jesus' shepherding. And what is that pattern? There are several components of good shepherding listed here, but let me just mention three. First, we care for one another with the deep conviction that the flock belongs to Jesus. In verse 6 he calls them "my sheep." Whenever we care for someone in the church, we are caring for one who is precious to Jesus. They belong to him and are entrusted to us. It is as if Jesus comes to you and says, "Here's Bill. There is no one more precious to me, and I am entrusting him into your care." Second, a good shepherd serves the sheep instead of himself. As we care for one another, we must avoid the trap into which the bad shepherds of the early part of this chapter fell. They used the sheep instead of serving them, viewing others as existing for them. We are to serve the sheep instead of serving ourselves through the sheep. Third, a special focus is to be given to the weakest among us. It is the lost sheep who receives the passionate and extensive attention from the shepherd. He spends his time with the injured and sick sheep. Any strength God has given you, whether it is financial, physical or emotional, is intended to be used to help the weak.

CONCLUSION:

Let's close in prayer, asking that God's kingdom might come.