

Ezekiel 34 is a wonderful image of the gathering together of God's children. Ezekiel was writing his book in Exile in Babylon, and in this chapter, Chapter 34 we are at the beginning of the section which scholars call the Oracles of Consolation. Here, Ezekiel is telling God's people in Exile that there will come a day, a blessed day when God will gather his people together under a triumphant shepherd and bring them home. From a New Testament perspective, you and I know this victorious shepherd as Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who will indeed gather his faithful into His Kingdom, in the glorious company of the Saints.

But, as with so much of the Bible, this message from God through his servant Ezekiel speaks not only about the glory of the hereafter. It's also a promise of the blessing that you and I can have, right here, right now in this earthly life. And what does this promise from God say to you and me this morning, in this Church in Jacksonville, Florida? Well, let's take a look. I'm reading from page 1341 in your pew Bible, and we'll start with verse 11.

*"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. <sup>12</sup> As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness."*

*So, the first thing that God promises to His children, the very first thing that God says here is, "Fear not, my child, because I'm going to rescue you. You may be in a place of cloud and darkness, a place where life is so confusing, so complicated that you can't really see your way clear anymore; you may be in a dark place of pain right now. But hear this; I'm right here, and I've got a plan, and the only thing you have to do is reach up and take my hand. I'm going to lift you out of this, if you'll just let me, and my hands are so much bigger than your own."*

So Ezekiel's first message is a promise of rescue. And if the first part of this message is a promise of rescue, next God promises that he's going to bring us home. In Ezekiel 34:13, God says: *"I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land."*

Isn't that wonderful! Not only does God promise to gather his people together and rescue them from pain and darkness, but he also promises to bring us to a place of our own dwelling, a place where we are at peace. And that place will be for all of us a place on victorious heights, not a desert, not a wasteland, but a place of plenty and peace. That's what God is promising you and me in this beautiful passage from His holy word. He's going to bring us to a place where we are home.

And if this message from God through His prophet Ezekiel is a promise of rescue, and a promise of homecoming, look what else the Lord God vows to do for us. Starting at the beginning of verse 14: *"I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel."*

So, if at first, God promises His people rescue and homecoming, here He's also giving us a glimpse of the **kind** of life God's children can expect as we journey toward the Cross. This is a life where God himself is going to take charge of our sustainment and nourishment.

This is perhaps the part of the promise that God's children are most likely to forget. In your times of trial in this life, there is really only one question that you need to be able to answer. And that question is this, "Does God really love me?... Does God really love me?" Do I really believe what God promises me over and over again in His word? That he has numbered the hairs on my head. That He knows every tear that I have ever shed. That He has a glorious plan for me and for my life. That even now, He is cradling my life lovingly in the palm of His hand, and there is nothing that anyone or anything can do to take me away from Him. And He will always, always provide for me, if I can just learn to trust him completely. And that is part of the promise of Ezekiel 34, a promise that God is making to me and to you this morning.

So, we see that this wonderful prophecy from 600 BC that has come down to you and me this today, a promise that is still just as valid as it was the first days it was uttered; we see that here God promises to rescue his children from their distress, to bring these children to a place of homecoming, and to nourish, protect, and provide for these children. And here's the thing, when God makes a promise, he keeps it!

But God isn't finished yet; no, not by a long shot. Because in the next couple of verse we see something really beautiful. Reading verse 15: *"I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak..."*, *but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice."*

This part of the promise is all about God taking charge of our restoration. God isn't going to delegate salvation. He didn't send down his assistant to defeat death on that first Easter morning with the empty tomb. He came down to us himself, in the beautiful person of the Christ. That's how much He loves His children. He himself is our shepherd. And if you let Him, God's going to take charge of your life. And he's going to make you lie down in green pastures. If you'll let him, God will show you where and when you need to rest. And if you're a little stubborn about taking that vacation that you've been postponing, if you've been too focused on your work to take some free time with your family, there are going to be some times in this life when God **makes** his sheep lie down in green pastures.

And by the way, that's just part of the way God loves His children. And if you're willing to be lead by God into that kind of rest, the Bible tells us here just what a wondrous kind of rest this is. God says, I'm gonna' make my sheep lie down whenever they need it! *"I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak."* This is not just some vague promise of R&R. This is God, the creator of heaven and earth promising His children times of absolute and complete restoration. God doesn't want his children just a little refreshed. When we come to lie down in the pasture that God has prepared for us, we are going to be restored, renewed, revived, redeemed. That's the kind of rest period that God has in store for His children. If we'll only let him take charge of our lives.

Finally, if this message from God to us through his prophet Ezekiel is a promise of rescue, and homecoming, and provision, and restoration, there's one more precious thing that God promises his children in this prophecy. And that's justice. Reading from the end of verse 16: *"But the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats."*

You may think that might in this world makes right. You might believe that the corrupt of this world have the upper hand. But God is not mocked. Do you think the God who formed the earth, the God who created light and darkness, the God who vanquished death, do you think that this God doesn't see full well just exactly what's going on in the injustices of this world? You can't hide from God, and those who practice injustice, and abuse, and corruption, and violence, they will always come to an end, and so often what a horrible end it is, as recent happenings in our international news headlines indicate so very clearly. God will always separate the sheep from the goats, just like Ezekiel promises. So, yes, God is a God of rescue, and homecoming, and provision, and restoration. But God is also a God of justice.

Just as David has said near the beginning of his beautiful 27<sup>th</sup> Psalm, "The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?" As Paul says in his mighty letter to Romans, "If God is for us, who can stand against us?" (see Rom. 8:31). My God and your God demands righteousness and justice, and his anger against those who practice deceit and oppression upon his children is terrible to behold. Yes, God is indeed a God of justice. And there will come a day, and we read about it this morning in the Gospel from Matthew, there will come a day when God sets the world aright. And all those who have practiced the mercy of God will enter into the joy of their master. But the end of the wicked makes the heart tremble.

The lesson this morning is a prophecy where God gathers together his children. This week has begun a season of joyous fellowship, a season of gathering together, as we begin to share the joy and the love of those around us in a special way. And as we take this time to join with family and friends and even strangers, as we take stock of all the richness of God's blessing, let us also make a joyful outpouring of praise and thanksgiving for the King who is coming. For he comes, for he comes to bring his flock to the mountain heights of exalted glory, to tend his sheep, to seek out the lost and strays, to find up the injured, to strengthen the weak, and to set his people free. For the King is coming, Alleluia! Praise his holy name, the holy name of love. Thanks indeed be to God, the Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

James Barnhill, 11-21-17