

Hope Amid Struggle and Tribulation  
Ezekiel 34:1-2, 4, 11-16, 22-23, 30

2022  
John 10:14-15, 22-30

Ezekiel 34:1-2, 4, 11-16, 22-23, 30 (New Revised Standard Version)

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 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, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God.

John 10:14-15, 22-30 (New Revised Standard Version)

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”

A mother was dealing with an angry and rebellious teenage daughter.

Things at home had gotten ever more bitter and impossible.

There were strange, tough new friends, crude harsh language,  
horrible arguments, sneaking out at night without explanation,  
money missing, failing grades and into trouble at school.

Things were spinning further and further out of control,

until finally a phone call from the police one night,

to come, bail this increasingly difficult daughter out of jail.

Once in the car, they hardly looked at each other

and they didn't speak at all on the way home that night,  
and even the next morning before school, nothing was said.

That evening when she got home from work,  
the mother handed her daughter a small gift-wrapped package.  
She tore it open and looking inside she saw a small stone in the box.  
She gave her mother a quizzical, confused look,  
who said, "go ahead, read the note."

With that little rock from the package in her hand,  
she unfolded the note and read out loud:

**"This rock is more than 200 million years old ---  
and it would take even longer than that, before  
I will ever give up on you or stop loving you."**

God's gracious love is like that,  
or as in Hosea 17:8, like a mother bear robbed of her cubs...

Back when the people of Israel were moving into the Promised Land,  
God warned through Moses and the prophets over the centuries,  
that if they turned away from God and his ways of justice,

then their nation would be defeated and conquered,  
and they would be taken in exile into captivity. Deut. 30:17-18

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and  
serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; **you shall not live long in the land** that you are crossing  
the Jordan to enter and possess.

The prophet Ezekiel wrote during the Babylonian exile,  
which was a terrible & bitter experience of loss & suffering.

But as bad as it was to be held captive in a foreign land,  
the worst part was feeling hopelessly distant from God,  
and knowing that though repeatedly warned by the prophets,  
**they had themselves brought it down on themselves.**

The beginning chapters of Ezekiel  
describe how that nation had rejected and turned aside from God,  
and lays much to the blame on their leaders who lead them astray,  
both political and religious, who exploited their authority.

The religious leaders were supposed to love and guide the people,  
to care for them, to teach them, to feed them spiritually,  
with mercy to help the weak, and seek the lost & strayed.

And through the prophet Ezekiel, God accuses the religious leaders  
of greed, neglect and abuse as false shepherds of Israel. vs. 2,4

Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You  
have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not  
brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

Then the next verses in chapter 34 **change direction toward hope**,  
as an amazing and powerful promise of grace and restoration,  
as God addresses their hopeless situation of defeat and exile  
with wonderful words of hope in a series of "**I will**" statements.

vs. 11~16:

For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek  
out their flocks, their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them ... I will feed them ... I will

feed them with good pasture ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, says the Lord GOD. 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.

In this Ezekiel text, God reassures us, by promising to seek out the defeated and the failures, all who have messed up their lives, offering renewed hope and the possibility of restoration,  
**even to those who are justly suffering and enduring the consequences of their own dreadful decisions.**

We know that sometimes we fail and mess things up in terrible ways and often make wrong choices and some very foolish compromises. We know that our lives can get very messy & complicated because at times we do and say things that for good reason **we regret.**

But the truth and good news is, that we are still precious, the beloved sheep of God's pasture, who seeks and finds us even when it's our own fault we got lost.

**God brings us back from however distant we have strayed, and with love, binds our wounds when we have been hurt...  
... as God's grace, compassion, & healing purpose transforms our lives...**

... and then Ezekiel goes on to describe the promised Messiah, vs. 22-23  
I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: **he shall feed them and be their shepherd.**

At the beginning of his earthly ministry Jesus visited a synagogue where he read a passage about the work of the promised Messiah, the he sat back down and said, (Luke 4:21)  
"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In fulfillment of that promise, that prophecy of salvation, Jesus did seek the sinner, the lost, outcast & strayed, all those whom the Pharisees rejected and drove away.

For the three years of his ministry in Palestine, his life & ministry demonstrated & fulfilled the promise of God to send the Messiah, as Jesus sought and found the lost, healed the blind and lame...

... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. 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.

In John, when Jesus was at the Temple for the feast of Dedication, and the Jewish leaders demanded that he answer directly, vs. 22-24

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

The festival of the Dedication is a significant detail in this passage. About 170 years earlier when the Greeks conquered Jerusalem, King Antiochus IV desecrated the Temple with a statue of Zeus.

Judas Maccabees led a rebellion that against all odds **prevailed**, and first thing they removed Zeus and rededicated the Temple, which is what the festival of Dedication intends to celebrate...  
... hope for victory and the nation of Israel restored.

The timing and place where Jesus is being challenged suggest they are looking for a military-messiah to drive out the Romans, and restore the nation of Israel to be under their rule.

The particular Greek word used here in John, 'gathered around him' specifically infers, surrounded by a hostile gathering, who are demanding --- and firing attack-questions at him.

Now the religious leaders who were opposing Jesus at the Temple certainly knew these same messianic prophecies of the OT, and they knew of the miraculous healings Jesus had been doing – and that he was fulfilling what the prophets had foretold  
**but they were choosing not to accept the connection.**

They were not looking for -- nor would they accept someone who challenged their religious power & presuppositions.

And so, there was nothing that Jesus could possibly say or do that could possibly break through the hardened shell of their pride, that could break through the crust of their sure presuppositions.

In stiff-necked arrogance they refused to see or to accept, they would not listen or believe, just as Jesus explains, vs. 25-26

Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.

The fault was not inadequate signs, or a lack of evidence, but their refusal to see because it did not fit their assumptions.

**Superiority and pride became their impenetrable shell against truth.**

The truth is, none of us can recognize things we refuse to believe. A stubborn sense of certainty can filter out any offered proof, and so since they would not even consider the possibility they could not receive Jesus or be of the Shepherd's flock.

And for those who **do** hear and accept, those **do** who believe and follow, even in the extreme of death's darkest valley or worst struggle,  
**our shepherding God remains unmistakably close by our side.**

From the news and from the conversations I seem have these days, it's clear to me that the context & culture in which we are living comes with a severe sense of struggle, near-panic and concern, and with a feel of uncertainty & disquiet about our direction.

Each week opposing perspectives and views seem to get more vicious. Political leaders and media sources incessantly stir things up. And as our ability and willingness as a culture, as a people to listen & consider other opinions & understandings **fades** it all serves to drive us further and further apart, and less able to function as a community, a nation.

As I've reflected on all that, an old memory came to mind, from years ago, my first day visiting Damascus, Syria. Our first destination that day was to be the Azm Museum, which was located in the ancient sultan's grand palace.

To get there we'd have to pass through the Suk, the old marketplace, with its tight narrow alleyways between stalls of excited sellers...

...that feels like running a gauntlet of super-aggressive merchants  
where they shove and wave items for sale in your face,  
where they shout at you in Arabic, French and English,  
**and grab & tug at you, anything to get your attention.**

It's very intimidating, energetic, wildly chaotic & even frightening.  
I have never seen a marketplace anywhere else in the world  
that was so aggressive & daunting, so loud and confusing,  
where it's impossible not to be jostled and shoved,  
and even feel overwhelmed, lost & confused at times.

Our Syrian guide had warned us, and then he reassured us again,  
that he would hold his red cap high in the air for us to follow  
as he led our group through that noisy and pressing marketplace...  
... as he'd put it, "follow me like baby ducks following their mother"  
which made me feel safe as I kept his red hat in sight and followed.

Somehow we passed through the crowded clamor of the Suk in Damascus.  
It turned out not to be so bad ---- no reason for fear or panic  
as he led us through that busy and overly-chaotic marketplace.

I was even able to enjoy the frantic cacophony of chaos all around me  
because I knew I was safe, secure and that I was in no real danger  
**as long as I could see our guide's hat going on before me,**  
for he ably took care of all that was needed  
for he was my shepherd, and I was of his flock.

And much as Jesus said, vs. 27-28

*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never  
perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.*

As we endure these unsure, difficult and challenging times,  
it is easy to get caught up in all that's going on around us,  
causing us to live in fear, anxiety and overwhelming dread—  
**but that's not how our gracious God wants us to live.**

As I've mention several times before, **we're exactly where and when**  
God has deliberately placed us for us to serve & grow faithfully,  
**and surely the safest place to be is within the will of God.**

Just as I passed through the Suk  
by focusing, staying close and following our guide's red cap,  
**so we can pass through this perilous and chaotic time in history  
by focusing, by staying close as we're following Jesus Christ.**

**That is our hope** in God's promise, that no one will snatch us away  
from our true shepherd who seeks and find, who heals and saves.

As we're assured in (Isaiah 40:10-11, Joshua 1:9),

*"Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is  
with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his  
arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. I hereby command you: Be strong and  
courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."*