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“Shepherds and Sheep”

Sermon Series: “Faith and Finance,” No. 3

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Ezekiel 34:1-16

1 The word of the Lord came to me, 2 “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? 3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. 5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. 6 My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

7 Therefore you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 8 As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, 9 therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 10 This is what the Sovereign Lord says, I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.”

11 For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 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. 13 I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. 14 I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. 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. 15 I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord.

16 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.

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We’re looking at the words of the prophet Ezekiel; if you’d like to turn there with me. Just to the right of Isaiah and Jeremiah ... Ezekiel, chapter 34.

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A couple weeks ago we began looking at the relationship between faith and finances.

That first week, we talked about how our society's diminishing morals, and particularly sexual immorality, is keeping us from fulfilling the creation mandate of Genesis 1. Culturally speaking...really the whole global West is failing to have children, which is damaging not only our *future*, but also our *present* because we're not producing the future generations into which we can invest today.

Though there *is, certainly, forgiveness* in Jesus for sin, immorality always has consequences, *some* being *financial*, and we're beginning to feel those in these days.

That was the first week.

Last week, we read Paul's words to Timothy about how the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and how the pursuit of money leaves people, in Paul's words, "*pierced with many griefs.*"

We said that, though money is neither inherently good nor bad, it *is* a source of power that will destroy all who give themselves to it.

Money is actually one of Satan's most effective tools in that he presents it as an alternative for God in our lives, even encouraging us to have faith in it, which is, of course, idolatry.

And idolatry never ends well.

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When I was in seminary, I was doing some remodeling work for a church in Nicholasville. I got to talking to the pastor there one day, and since I wasn't part of his congregation or denomination, he opened up to me.

He was fairly new at the church and when I asked him how things were going, he said, "Well, it depends. If you're asking if things are stable and the people are happy and the bills are paid, then I would say things are going well. But if you're asking if the people are growing and living by the Spirit and walking by faith, then I'd say things aren't well at all."

I asked, then, why...why he felt the people were not walking by faith, and he said this: "They don't need to walk by faith. They have a million dollars in the bank and they're living off the interest. A church doesn't need to live by faith in God when it has money in the bank."

That is absolutely true, and it can be just as true for a person or family, or a state or nation.

Who needs God when you have money, or regarding a nation, the ability to print money?

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As I read the Bible, it seems to me that God wants people to prosper, generally speaking.

I know there are times God raises people up and takes them down again for their own good – for their own spiritual welfare, and sometimes He uses economic hardship to work spiritual truths into people's lives – He certainly did for Israel.

But God's general wish is for His creation to thrive. God didn't create people to starve and suffer. He wants people to flourish and prosper, and when God is honored...when His moral commands are respected and followed, environments are created where people can be fruitful and multiply – in all sorts of ways.

Where trust and integrity and freedom and morality exist – where the fruits of the Spirit are present – people can live and create and do business together...and they can flourish; they can “fill the earth and subdue it,” like Genesis says we were created to do.

You might say that God's ways are the grease on the rails of success.

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*But...*when people **do** flourish...when they get a little **money** in the bank, history shows us that, more often than not, they **forget** that it was **God** and His ways that caused that to happen.

They forget it was God's principles that created the environment that allowed for their success, and as they forget that, they put their faith in their **money**...and they push God to the **side**.

They **forget** about His principles, and they begin to think that they can do whatever they want and live however they want...and so they do that – people, families, some churches...**nations** do that – they ignore God, while fully expecting to continue to flourish.

But they don't. They **can't** continue to flourish, because they've walked away from the very thing – the very **One**, behind their success.

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Now of course failure doesn't usually happen **immediately**. Cultures that have become immoral and godless can exist a long time simply because of **inertia**.

Newton's first law, you know? Objects that are in motion tend to remain in that motion, which means people, families, churches and nations can **appear** to be doing OK even after they've abandoned God.

They can look like they're doing fine...**for a time**.

But eventually, the frictions of immorality and godlessness **will absolutely** slow **down** and **stop** even the fastest moving train.

Those very frictions are slowing down our nation today – they've been doing so for decades.

Our leaders do everything they can to mask it...they perform all sorts of fiscal gymnastics, they increase police, they print money, they lie about different statistics and numbers, but the fact is, we're facing lots of financial friction in our nation because we're not doing things God's way.

Chuck Colson wrote about this years ago. He said,

“Americans...have a financial mess caused largely by moral failures in government, Wall Street, and the public. We're paying the bill for decades of self-indulgence, fueled by rampant relativism, rejection of the Christian work ethic, and materialism.”

But here's the word of hope. Colson continued:

"Christians, though, ought not to despair. Instead, we should redouble our efforts to winsomely engage our culture, because, remember, ***culture is just religion incarnate, and politics is only an expression of culture.*** So to fix broken politics, you fix broken culture, and to fix broken culture, you reinvigorate the Church."<sup>1</sup>

It's really true: culture is religion incarnate.

That tells me two things:

First, the true faith of people is reflected, not in what they say, but in the culture they help create. We can talk all we like, but talk means nothing apart from action. Preaching, teaching, writing, whining – all mean nothing if there's no action involved on our part. The difference we make comes in what we ***do***, how we ***live***, how we ***prioritize*** our time and abilities and finances.

And then second, we can know that with God, there is always hope for cultural rebirth and renewal. With God, there is no lost cause.

With His help, God's people ***can renew culture***, and we know this is possible because we saw it happen in Ezekiel 34.

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Ezekiel was a fearless prophet. He told his people what was going to happen; he told them about the destruction that was to come to Israel through Babylon.

Then, after it came to pass, Ezekiel comforted them with hopeful words about the messiah God would send to save them.

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You see, the problem with Israel, the cause of their captivity, according to Ezekiel here, was that their shepherds were unfaithful to God and to their tasks of leadership.

Now when Ezekiel speaks of shepherds, he's speaking about both ***political and religious*** leaders; they didn't separate them like we ***think*** we can today.

In Israel, if you were a leader, you were a leader, and those who were charged to lead were not leading faithfully.

In chapter 34 here, and particularly the first four verses, you get this vivid image of how those entrusted with leadership fattened themselves at the expense of their people. They stole from them, they used them, they neglected and brutalized them.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=11755>

Of course that sort of thing never happens in our day, today, does it?

Ha! Just look at how many leaders of nations today live in *palaces* – while their nation rots in hunger and poverty and disease around them.

I saw that really clearly when I visited Haiti years ago. The nicest building in the country, by far and away, was the presidential palace.

There's something wrong in that...when everywhere you look there's run down dumps and impoverished and hungry people...while the president lives and eats in luxury.

That happens all over the world today.

In some measure, it happens right here.

Notice that because of government caused inflation, people can't afford to buy homes today. But somehow government leaders can afford to own multiple homes.

We have to spend our grocery money carefully, but government leaders have people who shop and cook for them.

Republican or Democrat, it doesn't matter. Much like in Ezekiel's day, those who shepherd us live in different worlds, and they are drastically out of touch with their sheep.

The point is, as shepherds marginalize God and His principles in their lives and leadership, it's always the sheep who suffer.

And you know...that *really infuriates* God.

In places like Haiti and Sudan and Libya and Afghanistan, the people there don't even have a chance against the poverty and hunger and repression...because of corrupt shepherds.

But of course, the suffering of the sheep that's *most* tragic comes at the spiritual level.

When leaders put God and His word out to pasture...when they declare by law that right is wrong and wrong is right, and they put that into practice in their leadership, they lead the whole nation astray, spiritually.

They make God hard to find.

Not *impossible*, because wherever God is *sought*, He'll be *found*; He promises that.

But woe to those leaders...those shepherds...who obscure God...who attempt to hide Him from their people.

Think all that happened under communism in the Soviet Union.

Today, think China.

Think India.

Think Iran.

Think Cuba.

Think North Korea.

Leaders in places like those put their people in eternal, spiritual peril...not to mention in temporal, financial peril.

And believe me...believe Ezekiel: God is not pleased with them.

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At the same time, we can also believe Ezekiel and know that all is not lost.

In the absence of a good shepherd, in the midst of the tragedy of the unled, God Himself will step in.

He will not let His people suffer forever.

He will not unendingly tolerate injustice.

God says through Ezekiel there in verse 11,

“I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered...I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land.”

On down to verse 16, God says,

“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 was God's promise of redemption for the Israel of Ezekiel's day.

But this is also the hope for Christians today.

The rule of God Himself is coming.

The Good Shepherd is returning to make right all the injustices that poor shepherds through the ages have committed.

He comes for all who suffer because of financial messes caused by self-centered shepherds.

He comes for those who suffer in all different ways because of unjust rulers.

The Good Shepherd is coming, so there is a hope!

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Compared to most Christ-followers today, we here in the United States have it easy. But even the world's most poorly led brothers and sisters share in the hope of the Good Shepherd.

For our brothers and sisters who are persecuted today in Sudan and Pakistan,

For those who are hungry in Ethiopia and Somalia,

For those who are sidelined and oppressed in Burma,

For every Christian who is threatened in Iran and Libya,

For those who have had all their possessions stolen and their money devalued in Zimbabwe and Nigeria,

For every believer sitting in a North Korean or Chinese jail,

For every Christ-follower who hides in the woods in India and Yemen...

For every follower of Jesus who suffers today because some leader somewhere rejects the one true God and follows the gods of self and money, there ***is*** sure and certain hope!

God will not tolerate injustice forever.

God will come to their protection and defense.

One day, Ezekiel says in verse 27,

***“The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land. They will know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them. They will live in safety and no one will make them afraid.”***

Listen, no matter what tragedy you see in the news,

No matter what world, church or family leaders might do,

No matter what any earthly shepherd may say,

Christians need not despair.

We have hope in Jesus, because He lives today and He is returning someday to redeem our world and make all things right here.

That’s God’s message of hope and truth for our culture and our world, and He’s entrusted it to the Church to speak, because the world needs to know that there is a better way to live.

Our world needs to hear about God’s way...and then see that way authentically lived out. They need to witness lives of integrity and righteousness and other-centered love, because those are the proofs of God’s existence in a world of lies and immorality and self-centeredness.

As God’s people, we need to choose God’s way and live there faithfully and uncompromisingly.

And...we need to pray for the poor shepherds of the world, and for the sheep they lead astray - that God would redeem them all through a re-invigorated church.

If culture really is religion incarnate, then the church bears this responsibility, because we are Christ to our world.

Of course, we need God’s help to do this well, so instead of giving our time to whining and complaining about the financial struggles of our world, let’s give that time to asking God to visit us in powerful ways,

to intervene in our world,

to save and transform our earthly shepherds,

to motivate and embolden His Church,

and to use us, individually, in any way He likes.

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## **Prayer**

Father, You are our one true King...we confess that today. Help us to be faithful to You and Your ways and values, especially in our handling of money, that we might be examples of your love and care to our broken world.

And Lord we pray for the salvation and transformation of all earthly shepherds in our world. May they see who You really are and give You the place of leadership in their lives that You deserve...for their own sake, but also for the sake of the people they lead.

And Lord, never let us forget that you are returning one day to right the wrongs here. You are returning one day to make all things new. We look to that day...we look to You...with confidence and with hope. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

**Closing Song:** "All the Way My Savior Leads Me"

### **Closing Word & Benediction**

Our culture is not dead, but it is lost.

It needs to see God, to find Him and embrace Him again.

Will you take up your part in revealing God to our world, specifically in the way we use our finances?

He so much wants to redeem this culture...He really does...and He's looking to partner with us to do it. Let's make the financial part of our lives coincide with His ways and His values so the world might see that we're different people...we're different people even financially.

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Thanks for coming to worship today. The Lord bless and keep you. Amen

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