

The Gospel of the Kingdom

Week 5 - Day 3: The Prophets and Kingdom Living

As a new parent, I remember hearing from those more experienced that I should “enjoy it; they grow up so fast!” I valued this advice, but I felt like we were prepared enough on our own. After all, we had done a good job enjoying life so far and taking advantage of what God had given us. Surely parenting would be the same!

But a funny thing happened--after two weeks, it was like our newborn was a totally different person. After six weeks, he had grown into yet another stage, and at six months old, he was new again! Six more months went by, and we had a walking, talking human, completely different to my newborn. It had gone SO FAST, and we hadn't done a good enough job of enjoying it.

If only we had lived out the advice given by those who had gone before, who had truth to tell us from their experience, and submitted ourselves to do what we KNEW was right in our minds. It's not like we thought they were wrong--we just didn't live it out fully.

I think that's sort of like what the prophets felt like in their ministry during the time of the kingship in Israel. The role of the prophet was sort of like that of the experienced parent--they had an intuitive understanding of the heart of God through special revelation and a lifetime of ministry. They spoke to the kings, priests, and people of Israel truths that they should have already known--that they DID already know! They reminded them of what the center of God's Kingdom was like. They sometimes shared how the nation of Israel fell short and how they needed to change their ways, but they also told the nation of Israel how God Himself would make everything right at the end. They told the truth, both about how Israel fell short and how God would build His Kingdom anyway!

One of the most poignant passages describing both the downfall of Israel's ability to live out the Kingdom and God's promise to restore it is found in Ezekiel 34. Ezekiel was a prophet during the time of the Babylonian captivity, looking back at the kingdom on earth and how it failed and towards a new type of kingdom that would never fail.

As you read Ezekiel's words to Israel's priests, pay specific attention to these three segments:
1) a view into what the Kingdom of God SHOULD be like 2) the consequences when it isn't and
3) the solution that God offers.

Ezekiel 34:1-6 The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 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. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. 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.

First, I think that verses 1-6 show us what God's Kingdom living looks like. It's a place where the weak are cared for. It's a place where the sick are healed. It's a place where the broken can find wholeness! The truths of the Kingdom are eternal--from the very beginning of God forming his family and all throughout His plan of restoration for humanity. It's a self-sacrificing, others-oriented, upside-down world where the greatest is the servant of all and the least becomes chief.

But that's not how most of us live, nor how the world operates! That's why verses 7-10 hit us so hard.

Ezekiel 34:7-10 Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 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, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 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.

We know that we've failed! We know that we have served God, even, primarily as a way to get ahead! We've put our own needs before those of others. That's true of us today, even as it was true of the shepherds of Israel then. And God has to step in to make things right. For the Israelites, that was a time of exile. I think these judgment passages show us that God takes kingdom living seriously! This isn't an optional thing for His followers. If we want to be like Him, we have to be like Him in all areas

Verses 11-16 continue with that promise--that when we are too weak to be like Him, He promises to fill the gap!

Ezekiel 34:11-16 For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 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. 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. 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. 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.

Ezekiel claims that God will step in and care, serve, love, forgive, and set things right. He HIMSELF will search out the sheep, including each and every one of us. We have seen that just like Israel, we can only be a part of the Kingdom if HE pursues us because HE makes it all happen!

But how will God make this all happen? Saul, David, Solomon, and all of the kings have given us glimpses into God's kingdom but the problem remains: no human has ever been able to conquer the power of sin and the kingdom of the serpent. How would God set humanity free?

The prophet Isaiah talks about God's servant who would step into our world to bear the punishment of sin so that many might be counted righteous!

Isaiah 53:4-6 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:10-11 Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

The greatness of Isaiah's Suffering Servant and Ezekiel's Good Shepherd is that somehow God will make a way for us to be in relationship with Him through this figure! He will fill the gap by stepping into our world, healing us, restoring us, and gathering us through this figure! What a soothing balm for our fractured world! This is surely Good News!

Lo and behold, this righteous one would come from none other than the line of David:

Isaiah 11:1-5 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

Isaiah 11:10 In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious

I wonder if Ezekiel and Isaiah thought that the Good Shepherd / Suffering Servant would come to restore God's earthly Kingdom in their day. The biblical story tells us that there were almost two generations of exile in Babylon, told in the books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Chronologically speaking, we'll continue on this journey and look at some of the ways that God's people faithfully lived out their calling in Babylon.

However, I think you'll be surprised that before the Hebrew Bible talks about life in Babylon, the order specifically jumps to the collection of writings that bring us back to the era of Solomon and David!

Why does the kingdom story seem to pause here and return to various writings reflecting on the era of David and Solomon? We will explore this question in the next entry!

-Buz Hannon

Share the Gospel: The role of the prophet was to remind Israel that even though Israel fell short and needed to change their ways, God Himself would continue to step in and make everything right at the end. Who in your life needs to hear about the Good Shepherd, the suffering servant, the Messiah who will eventually come to make a way for us to be in relationship with God? Who in your life needs to hear that the Kingdom is a good place that God will set everything right?

Personal Observations, Reflections, and Prayers: