

Lead On, Good Shepherd!

Ezekiel #7 | Jun 9, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | by Steve Howell

Opening

Good morning! It's been a busy week at Tonganoxie Christian Church. We've had an amazing time with our Kid's Ministry hosting Vacation Bible School. This year's theme was "On the Case" – a detective-themed VBS where we were exploring some mysteries from Jesus together.

The kids had a fantastic time singing, making crafts, playing games, eating snacks, and learning about God's Word. To help them, we utilized many volunteers (both youth and adults) along with our intrepid super sleuths, "Detective Winters" and his assistant "Miss Friday" (Youth Minister Jordan Teghtmeyer and Preacher's Kid Chayne Howell).

The kids, as always, really grew to love these characters as they came to life on stage. Our detectives were a little silly and not too deep...yet the kids were so excited to see them and give them a hug or a high five afterwards. The same goes for all our other volunteers. Kids don't have to know the whole story behind the characters or the people who help them; they just need to feel loved. And all our volunteers did a great job of loving the kids!

They also did a great job of communicating our Bible points to the students. We had the challenge of trying to teach stories out of Scripture to kids from preschool up through fifth grade! That's a wide range of understanding, knowledge, vocabulary, and faith. But each day we tried to make the Bible points relevant and relatable to the entire group.

That challenge is similar to what we do in *this* room each week. In our congregation, we have people at all different levels of experience, knowledge, and faith. We come with varying levels of enthusiasm and unequal experiences. Despite the differences, though, TCC tries to help all of us connect with the Bible points we study so you can discover how relevant and relatable this truth is to your life!

We want each person to leave VBS and/or Sunday Services with a greater love for Jesus and a greater knowledge of who He is and the worship He deserves! That is our goal and our prayer each week...and it is what we want you to leave with today!

To help us do that, we're going to continue the "detective" theme this morning and hopefully solve a small mystery. This one is a case of identity and activity that I came across in my preparation for today's sermon. Are you ready to go "on the case" with us today? Ok, then... let the investigation begin!

The case begins in the New Testament book of John. If you brought your Bibles, please turn to John 10.

“I Am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:1-18)

Immediately prior to John 10, Jesus was speaking to a crowd of Jewish leaders after He had healed a man who was blind from birth. The man he healed believed in Jesus and encouraged the Jewish religious leaders (the Pharisees) to become followers as well, but the Pharisees stubbornly refused. In the interaction that follows here in John 10, Jesus speaks to these Jewish leaders as well as the crowd

“I tell you the truth, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! But the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don’t know his voice.” Those who heard Jesus use this illustration didn’t understand what he meant,...” (John 10:1–6, NLT)

Jesus tries to convey His identity to those who listened, but they “*didn’t understand.*” So, He continues.

*...“so he explained it to them: “I tell you the truth, **I am the gate for the sheep.** All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.*

*“**I am the good shepherd.** The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don’t belong to him and he isn’t their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he’s working only for the money and doesn’t really care about the sheep.*

“I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.

“The Father loves me because I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again. For this is what my Father has commanded.” (John 10:7–18, NLT)

After hearing these statements, there was a divided reaction to Jesus’ words. Some thought he was crazy and/or possessed. Others were inclined to view Him more positively. But that brings us to today’s mystery: What about us? **How should we react to Jesus’ claims of being the “Good Shepherd?”**

Initial Reaction?

On the surface, for me personally, I sometimes react...poorly. I hear John 10 and I hear:

- **Uninteresting Clichés.** After years of ministry and church, I've heard, read, and re-read these statements so many times that they start to lose their impact. I just skim over them and think, "Yeah, I know..." (Anyone else feel the same?)
- **Unreliable Farm Stories.** I'm not a farmer; I've never raised livestock. And even if I did, the practices today are much different from then, so it's hard to relate.
- **Unflattering Comparisons.** Sheep seem stupid. Yes, they are getting good treatment, but sometimes I resent that a "shepherd" gets to be in charge. I don't always want to be a sheep, and I don't always want to be herded.
- **Unpleasant Work Dynamics.** Maybe I've had too many years of watching the sheep dog vs. the coyote on the old Loony Toons cartoons, but it's hard to think of the sheep/shepherd relationship as anything more than an employee's task at best...or an owner's exploitation at worst...even though Jesus describes it as more than a job.

Admittedly, those aren't great reactions. I *know* that there is more to consider, but this is where I have a mystery. How do I move past my initial reaction and see if there is more to it?

What about you? How do *you* react to these statements? In this passage, we have words *from* Jesus *about* Jesus. What is He claiming? And what does it mean for you?

How should we react to Jesus' claims of being the "Good Shepherd?"

To answer, we all need to look at some clues in the text.

Detective Tools

A Scripture Sherlock might recognize several things immediately from this passage on their own, but even if you don't have a strong Bible background, you do have some tools to help you get more out of the text. Regular detectives use tools like magnifying glasses, fingerprint ID kits, and DNA analysis to gain extra info. Bible detectives have *other* tools to help connect the dots. We have:

- **"Notes."** If you look at the bottom of the page, some Bibles have extra information written to explain the passages' historical or literary contexts. If you inherited a Bible from a devoted Christian, you might find some of their insights jotted on a page, too!

- **“Cross-references.”** Look closely at the verses in most Bibles, and you’ll find small letters in superscript scattered throughout. These letters correspond to references in the margins that point you to related passages. The cross-references help you quickly find other places that share similar words, themes, and messages.
- **“Experts.”** If you look up from the text, you’ll notice people in our church, sitting around you, who have been studying Scripture for years. They might have thoughts and explanations to supplement, enhance, or shift your perspectives. The experts can share the wisdom they carry as you study God’s Word together!

When we use these tools, we find a few clues that can help us gain a better understanding and appreciation of who Jesus claimed to be!

“I AM” Statements

Looking at the *notes*, you’ll discover that in this chapter John shares two statements (out of seven in this Gospel) made by Jesus beginning with the words “I AM.” Jesus says, “**I am** the gate” and “**I am** the good shepherd.”

What’s the clue here? The “I AM” is a reference to God’s divine name, “Yahweh.” Yahweh means “I AM” in Hebrew – a reference to his everlasting, eternal existence! And when John emphasizes this wording in his Gospel’s original Greek language, he shares a clue that Jesus is not just some man – He is God himself!

The clue of “I AM” elevates the importance of Jesus’ words here and gives us more reason to listen.

“Good Shepherd” Statements

Looking at the *cross-references*, you’ll discover that John 10 isn’t the first place that God discusses shepherds. For example, in the NIV translation, the following cross-references are listed for John 10:11.

Ps 23:1; Isa 40:11; Eze 34:11–16, 23; Mt 2:6; Lk 12:32; Heb 13:20; 1 Pe 2:25; 5:4; Rev 7:17

Each of these passages uses the “*shepherd*” analogy where God is like a shepherd and His people are His sheep. So, it’s not just a one-off comment by Jesus; instead, He’s clearly tapping into a deeper trove of Biblical precedent here.

You might recognize some of the familiar references like Psalm 23 (“*The Lord is my shepherd...*”), but there are other, less familiar passages included, too.

Like the one...*there*...in Ezekiel 34.

Let’s follow this clue and turn back to the Old Testament prophetic book of Ezekiel to see what we might find!

Messages of Hope (Ezekiel 34-37)

You're probably not surprised that we're heading back to the book of Ezekiel.

Over the past several weeks we have been going through a sermon series on this book. And even if you missed all of the past sermons, the title slide introducing today's sermon was a dead giveaway that Ezekiel was in our plans!

Our series has been an overview filled with some important truths. Last week, we had a chance to review the first 33 chapters, and in them we found God commissioning Ezekiel to receive and declare divine messages (through words as well as deeds). Many of the messages have been messages of judgment for both the nation of Judah and the nations surrounding Judah. But as we transition to chapters 34-37, we begin to see a change as the messages shift from judgment to hope.

It's like a great halftime speech by a football coach (minus most of the profanity). Have you ever experienced one of those? The coach walks in and throws down his clipboard.

"You guys are playing terribly! No effort! No hustle! No drive! You can't make a tackle, and you sure aren't looking like a team that will have any success. That's the worst I've seen in years! No wonder we're down 21-0."

At this point, the players hang their heads. Someone bangs his helmet on the ground in frustration. Everyone knows they've failed.

But then the coach switches gears.

"You're better than this. I've seen your work over the past season. This isn't the team we are. This isn't the end for us. You can get back in the game, one possession at a time. One stop here. One score there...and then we're competing. If we get two, we make them nervous. Three and you're tied! And then it's anyone's game! If you do what you're supposed to...what you CAN do...then we're going to walk out of here with a victory! Who's with me?!?!? Let's goooo!!!!"

God has taken 33 chapters to chew out the team. Now, starting in chapters 34-37, He begins to present hope!

Pictures of Promise

God presents hope in several ways in this section. Ezekiel uses a variety of messages to share God's good plans for the nation and its future.

- God promises the **punishment** of His people's **enemies**. Their opposition and violence to Israel would not go unnoticed or ignored. (Ezekiel 35)
- God promises a **resurgence in prosperity** for Israel. Their mountains would not be the site of defeat and plunder; instead, they would have abundance and riches. (Ezekiel 36)
- God promises to bestow **His Spirit** on the people and give them a **new heart**. Unlike the heart of stone they had in the past, now God would put a new heart of flesh with a clean spirit within them.
- God promises a **revival** for Israel. Like dry bones reassembling and becoming fully-fleshed, living people, God would revive the "dead" nation of Israel and make her alive again. (Ezekiel 37)
- God promises a **reunion** of His people, using a visual aid (two sticks joined together) to illustrate how they would reunite. (Ezekiel 37)

Each of these promises would inspire and encourage the Jews in exile. But God also provided hope by talking in-depth about *shepherds*.

"You Are My Sheep" (Ezekiel 34)

Chapter 34 is focused on sheep and shepherds. And as I read through the chapter, it's like Jesus' words from John 10 come to life. His words gain an entire backstory! Talk about a big clue! There is quite a bit to explore in this section (more than we can cover in depth today) so I encourage you to study more on your own. Use some of the sermon discussion questions listed in your bulletin to get more out of it. But for now, please listen so you can understand what God says!

Bad Shepherds (Ezekiel 34:1-10)

God starts out by calling the leaders of Israel *bad shepherds*.

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign LORD: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. They have wandered through all the mountains and all the hills, across the face of the earth, yet no one has gone to search for them."
(Ezekiel 34:2-6, NLT)

These bad shepherds exploited the sheep. They only focused on their own needs instead of the needs of the people.

When you think about today, with leaders like our own politicians, I know the description of *bad shepherds* is difficult to relate to. Right? (wink, wink)

Seriously, our own national leaders are typically no better. Sometimes it seems like they are more interested in lining their own pockets or enhancing their own reputation than they are interested in fixing problems! Not every person is like that, but enough are to make self-focused, greedy politicians a stereotype.

God continues by denouncing these shepherds and proclaiming that He would hold them accountable. They would be removed, and the sheep would be rescued.

But how?

A Good Shepherd (Ezekiel 34:11-30)

God's solution is to take on the role of leadership himself!

"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. I will bring them back home to their own land of Israel from among the peoples and nations. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel and by the rivers and in all the places where people live. Yes, I will give them good pastureland on the high hills of Israel. There they will lie down in pleasant places and feed in the lush pastures of the hills. I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign LORD. I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!"

(Ezekiel 34:11–16, NLT)

Throughout this passage we find themes that echo and reverberate through the Bible.

- God will **search** for his sheep, just like in Luke 15 (the parable of the lost sheep)
- God will **separate** out the sheep (his people) from the goats (those who make life hard for his people), just like in Matthew 25 (the end times' separating of the sheep and goats).
- God will **satisfy** all the needs of his sheep, removing affliction and providing healing, just like in Revelation 7:17.

As a shepherd, God will provide a respite from the abuse and exploitation of the flock. Indeed, He will be THE Good Shepherd.

"Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will surely judge between the fat sheep and the scrawny sheep. For you fat sheep pushed and butted and

crowded my sick and hungry flock until you scattered them to distant lands. So I will rescue my flock, and they will no longer be abused. I will judge between one animal of the flock and another. And I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David. He will feed them and be a shepherd to them. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David will be a prince among my people. I, the LORD, have spoken!" (Ezekiel 34:20–24, NLT)

People and nations have always been looking for “the One” who can fix their situation. Sometimes they get noble, benevolent leaders who try to do what is best for the country (think Abraham Lincoln); more often they get power-hungry tyrants who make life worse for their people (think Josef Stalin). Yet God gives a multi-stage promise in verses 23-24 that solidifies His identity as “the One.” He says:

- **“I will set over them”** – this is God’s plan, not anyone else’s!
- **“...my servant David...”** – not a reference to the historical David (king over Israel centuries before). Instead, this is a prophetic reference to Jesus! God had promised someone from “the line of David” to be on the throne forever (see 2 Samuel 7) and Jesus is that fulfillment.
- **“He will feed them and be a shepherd to them”** – He provides the care and provision the people longed for!
- **“and I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be a prince among my people.”** – God and his Son will do this together.
- **“I, the Lord, have spoken”** – God’s message is certain!

God’s solution will result in blessings and prosperity and peace (34:25-31). It will result in spiritual obedience and fulfilled covenants and God’s close presence (37:24-28).

This is the future God planned for when Jesus takes on the mantle of “Good Shepherd.”

Reacting to the “Good Shepherd”

And this helps me solve the mystery of how to react to Jesus’ claims of being the “Good Shepherd.”

The powerful passage from Ezekiel 34 changes how I approach Jesus’ words in John 10. It isn’t just an overused, convenient metaphor that Jesus pulls out of nowhere. It isn’t an irrelevant analogy. It isn’t just a job description. It is a core identity!

The claim of *“I AM the Good Shepherd”* is a claim of fulfillment! Jesus is claiming the mantle God initiated back in Ezekiel 34. He is now identifying as that “prince among the people” who is ready to put into motion God’s plan and promises.

“I AM the Good Shepherd” is a dramatic reveal. It is a goosebump-inducing line when you understand all that Jesus is fulfilling and doing!

“I AM the Good Shepherd” is a claim that impacts your life *today*. Right here, right now!

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, it means at least four things for you this morning:

1. **If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, you matter to Him!** The flock is precious and valuable to the Shepherd. If He searches out sheep who are lost (like it says He does!), then He wants to bring you back. For those of you who battle with **depression** or **shame** over past events, take heart! God says that he seeks out these sheep not based on their worthiness but based on His character. It is for His own name's sake that He does this (Ezekiel 36:32). You matter to Him, and you cannot put yourself out of His reach! Follow Him with **trust**.
2. **If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, you know His voice!** The sheep know their Shepherd's voice (John 10:3), and He wants to be heard! For those of you who are confused about what direction to go in life, take heart! Jesus is there to call you and lead you. You *KNOW* His voice. If you listen carefully, you'll be able to distinguish from the enemy's many voices – social pressures, internal cravings, false teachers. You know His voice, so you'll always have guidance. Follow Him with **attention**!
3. **If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, you are protected!** The Shepherd can protect us from external threats and internal ones, too. For those of you who are **fearful** about what might happen to you **financially** or **medically**, or who struggle with **conflicts** with other sheep, just know that the Good Shepherd laid down His life for your sake (and picked it back up! John 10:15-17). He is watching over, and he will judge with justice. You can trust His verdicts and his accountability. Follow Him with **confidence**!
4. **If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, you have a future!** *"I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken."* (Ezekiel 34:24). The Shepherd has a plan for us, with Him. He *will be* our leader eternally. He will lead us through the valley of the shadow of death and take us to green pastures and still waters. So, follow Him **forever**!

Conclusion

We started with a mystery of how to react to that statement.

Now we can say, "case closed!"

The words of Jesus in John 10 gain depth and power when we dig into the clues. They build on a solid foundation from the Old Testament promises of God. They give us an amazing picture of God's love, power, and protection.

Now when I hear His words, I have a greater love for Jesus and a greater knowledge of who He is and the worship He deserves! He is the Good Shepherd, and that gives me someone to follow.

What about you? How do you now react to Jesus' claims of being the "Good Shepherd?"

Prayer

Invitation

If Jesus is already your Shepherd, you're in good hands! Trust Him and follow Him. If you need prayer to help you follow Him better through difficult times, then we invite you to come forward so we can pray with and for you.

If Jesus isn't yet your Shepherd, then join the flock! He's been looking for you...for your own sake. He wants what is best for you, and that is Him!

Are you ready to follow? If so, then come forward and accept Jesus and your Lord and Savior...and Shepherd!

Please stand while we sing...

PRAYER REQUESTS:

Notes

How should we react to Jesus' claims of being the "Good Shepherd?"

"I Am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:1-18)

Detective Tools

"I AM" Statements

"Good Shepherd" Statements

Messages of Hope (Ezekiel 34-37)

Pictures of Promise

"You Are My Sheep" (Ezekiel 34)

Bad Shepherds (Ezekiel 34:1-10)

A Good Shepherd (Ezekiel 34:11-30)

Reacting to the "Good Shepherd"

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, you matter to Him!

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, you know His voice!

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, you are protected!

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, you have a future!

Discussion Questions

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Where does the buck stop? Who is responsible/guilty in the following situations? What are the factors we consider?
 - *A child from a good home gets arrested for drug possession.*
 - *A player shares that a college basketball team has a history of accepting favors/gifts for its stars.*
 - *A teacher skews test results to look better on standardized exams.*
 - *A White House insider is caught sharing classified info with Chinese spies.*

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- Read Ezekiel 3:16-21 and Ezekiel 33:1-9. How do they compare?
- Why do you think these passages bookend a section where Ezekiel must declare God's messages of judgment to Judah and the nations?
- Summarize the duties of the watchman. Summarize the duties of the people who hear his message.
- Do you identify more with the watchman or with the people who hear? Why?
- What warnings should a spiritual "watchman" be warning our church about today? Are these issues unique to our community, or do they impact society on a larger scale?
- Read Acts 20:28-31. What are some ways in which the elders of a church are responsible for the congregation? How well do you think the elders of TCC have done this (historically and/or currently)? How could you support and pray for them to do this task well?
- Why is it sometimes difficult to see spiritual danger? What could help your spiritual eyes to be more clear?

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Pray for boldness to offer a spiritual warning where it is needed. Ask for discernment to know how urgently to word your warnings.