

Genesis to Jesus: Shepherd
Ezekiel 34; John 10
June 21, 2026

Prayer

How does one describe the infinite, almighty God? How is it possible for us to begin to grasp what is on His heart or how He feels about you and me? As finite beings we will never be able to fully describe the infinite, but we can see the pieces He has revealed. Like a mosaic, when we put those pieces together, we gain a clearer image of who God is and how He feels about us.

Two weeks ago we explored how one of those pieces is found in the prophets. God used prophets as His mouthpiece to convey what He wanted people to know. Moses was the first one. He played such an important role that God promised to send another prophet like Moses, one who did what Moses did but brought a redemption that Moses could only foreshadow.

We then saw how Jesus' life, teaching, and miracles line up with Moses and so reveal Him to be the prophet God promised. Both the Old and New Testament carry the same message: God wants us to listen to Him so that we might find true life.

But God's heart for us is found in more than just His words. It is also seen in His demonstration of power. Last week Ethan reviewed the story of the Ten Plagues and how each plague demonstrated that YHWH's power is greater than all the gods of Egypt. This not only won their freedom. It also taught them who their God actually is.

It is no coincidence that Jesus' miracles displayed how His power is greater than all gods of Greece and Rome. When they were in Caesarea Philippi, in front of all the temples and shrines to those gods, Jesus asked His disciples, "You have seen everything I've done. Who do you say that I am?"

Both the Old and New Testament carry the same message: God displays His power for His glory and our rescue.

God's commitment to share words of life and use His power for our rescue become two pieces of the mosaic that unveil His heart for us. But it does not stop there.

God also communicates to us through familiar things in our culture and lives. How does the Infinite Creator communicate to His finite creatures? By using things we can understand. How can we describe God's faithfulness? It is like the sunrise. You can count on it every day. His love is like the ocean, easy to recognize but too large to fully understand or experience.

God uses the things we know well to help us know Him better. One of the images God chose to use, was the image of a shepherd. Like so many other cultural bridges, this one speaks to every people group, not just the Israelites.

Ancient Near Eastern writings are filled with shepherd and flock imagery. Shepherds and flocks were something people engaged with on a regular basis. It was part of the fabric of their lives, much in the same way as automobiles and asphalt roads are part of ours.

In the ancient world shepherding was a universal figure of speech and so it became an easy thing for the Israelites to pick up and use. While there are many facets to this image, I will focus on the details God used to communicate His heart to the people. Since we are not as familiar with shepherding and flocks, let's start with a quick overview.

The flock was the shepherd's precious possession. His job was to know each lamb well so that he could provide the comfort and attention each one needed. Out of deep love and concern, the shepherd provided them with food, water and safety. None of which was easy to do in that day or climate.ⁱ

A good shepherd was concerned about the condition of the flock. He noticed if they were weary and needed rest or if they were worried and needed comfort. He carried the helpless or injured ones in his arms (Is 40:11). At night he slept at the entrance of their enclosure or cave, becoming the gate that kept safety in and danger out.ⁱⁱ

His primary work was to keep the flock intact, which required him to know each one by name and to count them daily as they passed under his hand. In this way he made sure none was missing or lost.ⁱⁱⁱ And if one was missing, he'd start a search and rescue mission.

Relating a shepherd's task with his flock to a king's responsibility for his people was a logical connection and it provided a helpful metric that prophets used to accuse evil leaders of being unjust and greedy shepherds.^{iv}

Ezekiel 34:1-6 provides a great illustration of this.

Then this message came to me from the Lord: ²"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? ³You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. ⁴You 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. ⁵So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. ⁶They 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.

The idea of Israel's God, YHWH, being a shepherd finds its roots in their departure from Egypt. When they left the green fertile land of Egypt and entered the wilderness, it was God who provided their food and water. He was the one to lead them to their next location

and protect them from dangerous animals and murderous thieves.^v In every way, God was acting as their good shepherd.

Psalms 23 is one of the most famous passages describing God as a shepherd.^{vi} It expresses how God supplies all that is needed in food, rest refreshment and protection. It says that YHWH is the one who restores spiritual vitality and directs people toward right ways of living. Even in life's darkest moments, this good shepherd's presence comforts us. He uses His rod to protect us and His staff to both guide and rescue us.

The Song of Moses speaks of God leading His people to safe pasture.^{vii} We will soon see Ezekiel revealing how God seeks out the scattered and lost sheep. He binds up the injured and strengthens the weak. Isaiah combined God's strength with gentleness in his famous passage (40:11)

¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd.
He will carry the lambs in his arms,
holding them close to his heart.
He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.

Time and time again, scripture reveals God in an intimate relationship with His people, shepherding them through many dimensions of care and protection.^{viii} In other words, YHWH is their King who acts as a Good Shepherd and He expects His leaders to follow His example. When the leaders do not shepherd as He wants them to, He will step in to correct their injustices. Let's go back to Ezekiel 34:11-16.

¹¹ "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search and find my sheep. ¹² 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....¹⁵ I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign Lord. ¹⁶ 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!

Did you notice how it is not just the shepherds who are held accountable? The sheep will be as well. That last line about bringing justice to the fat and powerful is a warning to the sheep in the flock. YHWH said He will judge between one animal and another, separating the sheep from the goats and judging between the fat sheep and the scrawny ones.

The fat sheep used their strength to take advantage of the weak. After eating and drinking the good that God provided, they trampled down the grass and muddied the water for others. God will discipline these greedy sheep and bring justice to the flock. You can read this in Ezekiel 34 for yourself. God's words through His prophet are worth pondering.

So, the shepherd motif was widespread and well known all over the Ancient Near Eastern world. When God led them through the wilderness they saw how YHWH acted as their shepherd and so their kings were expected to act as God's under-shepherds, caring for the people in the same way God cared for His people.

God used this well-known shepherd-image as a bridge to help communicate His heart for His flock. But God did not just stop with a word picture. Let's return to Ezekiel 34 one last time (34:22-24).

So I will rescue my flock, and they will no longer be abused. I will judge between one animal of the flock and another. ²³ And I will set over them **one shepherd**, my servant David. He will feed them and be a shepherd to them. ²⁴ And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be a prince among my people. I, the LORD, have spoken!

God promised to send His servant, David, to be their singular shepherd. This prophecy was given after King David had already died so it was understood to be a prediction of one who was to come.

Centuries before Ezekiel the prophet Micah (5:1-4) says that this shepherd will come out of Bethlehem. His origins are from the ancient past. He will come on YHWH's behalf and he will lead his flock with YHWH's strength. He will be their source of peace and the people will live undisturbed.

Jesus was descended from King David. He was born among the flocks in Bethlehem and was visited by shepherds. And what was it the angels proclaimed? Something about God's peace coming through Him?^{ix}

The gospel writers present the people as being "sheep without a shepherd."^x And Jesus presented Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep and who knows His sheep on a deep and personal level. Listen to His familiar words from John 10:11-16 and remember that this is set in the context similar to Ezekiel. There are leaders who are not shepherding well so God will step in to make it right.

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. ¹² 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. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, ¹⁵ just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ 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**.

When Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the Good Shepherd, He was claiming YHWH's role for himself and so was hinting that He is YHWH come in human form. And just a few verses later, He stated it when He declared "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30). These words prompted His audience to pick up stones to kill Him for blasphemy, because being a mere man Jesus was claiming to be God (10:31-33).

This Jesus-as-God-who-is-Good-Shepherd thread continues into His arrest, crucifixion and resurrection, and travels all the way to His second coming.^{xi} This thread weaves its way from Genesis into Revelation and appears many times in the law, the prophets and the Psalms.

I am sure this theme of shepherd was one of our Lord's topics when He taught His disciples all that was written about Him in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27, 44).^{xii}

The shepherd imagery blends together tenderness with strength, intimacy with authority and faithfulness with responsibility. Through Jesus we see how the Lord God Almighty came to us in human form to reveal Himself as our Good Shepherd. He is the one who lays down His life for the sheep. And He is the one who takes it up again so that He might gather one flock to Himself and become their one indisputable and eternal shepherd.

The Old Testament introduced it. Jesus fulfilled it. Both testaments declare it. God's heart is to be your shepherd and for you to become part of His beloved flock.

There are seasons in each of our lives where we are tempted to conclude that God is not doing a very good job as a shepherd. An accident takes our loved one. A disease robs our health. Hunger grips our stomach. Worry grips our mind. Chromosomes break. Relationships collapse. Dreams vanish. Where is the Good Shepherd when life hurts so much?

We all know that every analogy breaks down at some point. I could press this one even further still, but I think it would be better to step back a moment and place this within the larger context of Scripture.

Our Good Shepherd is just that, He is good. So we start there. God has our best in mind no matter what our circumstances may be and He has the power to accomplish His purpose no matter what the obstacles may be. Our Shepherd is good.

Our Good Shepherd is also wise. While I only see the things immediately around me He knows the entire region. He knows where the dangers are, where the resources can be found and the paths we need to take. While I cannot know the future and can only guess at the coming weather, He knows the future and how we need to prepare for the storms that are coming. Our Shepherd is wise.

And in a most amazing way, the Good Shepherd knows you and knows every lamb in the flock. In other words, He knows what I need, He knows what you need, and he understands how one sheep can meet the need of another and so orchestrates us getting together.

He is good. He is wise. He knows each of us intimately and how to help us help each other. Meditating on how these truths interact can provide new insight on how God may be at work in our lives.

We all know that bad things will happen to us. It is part of living in this fallen world. It is interesting to note that the expectation that life should be free of problems is a very recent invention. For most of Christian history the expectation was that Christ would be with us in our sufferings, not that He would remove all our suffering.

Even so, it is hard for us when God seems absent or unresponsive.

When our son, Stephen, was a young child he would get distracted by things in the grocery store. I would hold his hand and tell him to stay close to me. After a while I'd let go of his hand and warn him that he needed to stay close to me and he would, until something new caught his eye.

So, from time to time, I'd just walk away. I never left him alone. I always had him in my sight and I could be there in an instant if he truly needed me. He just didn't see me and had to figure out why I "disappeared" and what he was going to do. It was part of growing up. I seemed absent, but I really wasn't.

When he was a teenager Stephen and I both had a pay-per-minute flip phone and so had to balance both time and money. It was a great budgeting exercise but a burdensome practice. One day he tried to call me and I did not answer. Again and again he called and all he got was voicemail. When I finally answered he was understandably upset with me.

After we worked through his concern and the reason for his call I said, "I need you to know that I was not able to answer your call because mom and I were setting up a Verizon family plan with unlimited minutes and texts." There was a long pause as he processed this information. And then he said, "Oh." The information changed his perspective about his need and the moment. That brief inability to connect was the only way to bring a greater blessing.

Every analogy falls short. But our shepherd is good, He is wise and He knows exactly what you need and how to supply it. Yes, it is hard when He seems absent and unresponsive. When you experience this, hold fast to what God has revealed in Scripture, stay close to others in His flock, and trust His heart for you.

I need to bring up one more thing. The book of Hebrews tells us that difficulties in life may be God's intentional training ground for us. He calls it God's discipline which can be viewed in two ways.

God's discipline could be a rebuke. We are engaged in an activity that is trampling the grass for someone else or taking us down a harmful path so like a good father God disciplines us to help train us in His ways. Or His discipline could be like an athletic program intended to train us in His ways. Both have a positive outcome as the goal. So the author writes,

God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way (Heb 12:10-11).

It is possible that the challenge you face may be God's training program to build His character in you. This option is also worth considering.

When we expect the shepherd to behave one way and He acts in another, it is wise to examine our own hearts first and see if Jesus might be doing something more than we realize.

The Good Shepherd is just one image God has used to communicate His love for you and me. His heart is to be our loving shepherd and for us to enjoy life as a member of His beloved flock.

Closing Prayer

This morning I can't help but think about fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers and the many men who play the role of a father. You have made each one your under-shepherd, caring for their flock in a way that reflects your tender love and provision.

Help each father here blend together tenderness, strength, intimacy, authority, faithfulness and responsibility as they express your love for the flock under their care. We know that this task is impossible without you so help each one be in close relationship with you so that they receive from the Good Shepherd what they need, to do what you have set before them to do. You are the one to give the wisdom and ability to overcome any obstacle and accomplish your purpose.

And in the end what is true for fathers is true for us all. It is not about us holding on to you. It is about your ability to hold firmly to us. Help us abide in you and like a branch in the vine or a sheep in the flock, to receive all we need from your abundant resources. In your name and for your glory, Amen.

Benediction (Heb 13:20-21)

²⁰ May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen

ⁱ When we think of pastureland most of us think of rolling green hills. But we are talking about the area of the world where the grass withers and the flower fades. The rainy winter and spring seasons provided an abundance of grass but when the drier seasons came, finding pasture and a faithful source of water was hard. But the shepherd had to do it. Additionally, shepherds had to protect against wild animals and thieves (1 Sam 17:34–35; Amos 3:12; John 10:1). In every way, the sheep needed the shepherd.

ⁱⁱ Num 32:16; Judg 5:16; 2 Chr 32:28; Ps 78:70; Zeph 2:6; John 10:1

ⁱⁱⁱ Jer 33:12–13; Ezek 20:37; cf. Jer 31:10–11; Pss 49:15—Eng v 14; 77:21—Eng v 20

^{iv} Is 56:11; Ezek 34:8–10; Zech 11:16–17

^v Gen 48:15; 49:24; cf. Deut 26:5–8; Jer 13:17; Mic 7:14

^{vi} King David, who is a shepherd, proclaims, YHWH is my shepherd. Think of this. Here is a king proclaiming that YHWH is his shepherd. So, we have the kingly shepherd of Israel being shepherded by God. The king is God's assistant shepherd, an under-shepherd. This becomes a beautiful picture of our own lives. We each have a flock that we are called to shepherd and so we shepherd under the authority, guidance and example of the Great Shepherd who watches over us.

^{vii} Exod 15:13, 17

^{viii} The psalmist address God as the Shepherd of Israel who leads Joseph like a flock and identifies them at the sheep of His hand and the people of his pasture (Ps 80:1; 95:7).

^{ix} Ezek 34:23–25; cf. also 1 Sam 16:1, 12, 13; Jer 23:1–8; Mic 5:2–4

^x Mark 6:34; Matt 9:35–10:6; 15:24; cf. Luke 19:10

^{xi} Mt 26:31; Mk 14:27; Mt 25:31–46 cf Ezekiel 34:17

^{xii} The image of Jesus as shepherd was so strong that the early church quickly adopted it as a way to describe its leaders. The elders of every church were expected to be Christ's under-shepherds. Peter said this in his first letter (1 Peter 5:1-3).

As a fellow elder, I appeal to you: ² Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. ³ Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example.