



The Lord Who Seeks the Straying

Behold Our God! – Read the Bible for Life Series #38

Ezekiel 34

David Sunday

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At the core of this passage are two key verses I'd like us to read together. These are the words of the Lord God our Shepherd, Ezekiel 34:15-16:

¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ 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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

This is God's Word. Let's ask for His help as we listen to it together.

Father, be our Shepherd. Some of us are wandering and straying. We need to be gathered back into Your fold. Some Lord are lost and they need to hear Your voice for the very first time. Lord, some are malnourished and need to be built up in the good pastures of Your Word. God, some are diseased. Others are weary and weak and need to be strengthened and healed. Lord, some of us are fat and complacent and we need to be humbled.

So we pray that You would look at this flock, and as Your Word is opened to us, open our hearts God and cause Your Word to do its saving, sanctifying effect through the power of Your Spirit. Lord, apart from You we can do nothing, so we pray You would meet us now and equip and empower this time of preaching, that it would truly be a time of worship and of transformation through the beauty and the power of Your gospel. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

The theme is "Leaders—Can You Trust Them?" Have ever been disappointed in a leader? Some people say that we're living in an era of unprecedented mistrust in authority. We are fed up and dissatisfied with leaders, whether it's in politics or in business or religion. We're tired of the evasiveness, the deceptiveness, the hypocrisy, the ineptitude of our leaders. Does anyone know how to tell it straight anymore? Does anyone know how to handle money wisely for the common good? And in a day when sexual impropriety has

become so commonplace that nothing surprises us anymore, how can we avoid becoming cynical and jaded?

Honest leaders. Faithful leaders. Skilled leaders. Compassionate leaders. They're hard to come by. I've heard it said that often those who are most qualified for leadership refuse to run for public office because of fear of the scrutiny and loss of privacy and impossible demands that are placed upon our leaders today. We're living in a time that is widely recognized to be a vacuum of leadership, a crisis of leadership. But 2012 is not the first era in the history of the world that's faced this kind of leadership crisis. In Ezekiel's day the leaders of Israel were called shepherds. Everywhere Ezekiel looked, he found a deplorable lack of integrity in leadership.

Turn back to chapter 22 of Ezekiel's prophecies. Here in a concise form Ezekiel gives us a glimpse of the abysmal failure of leadership that was pervasive in every part of Israel's society during his day. God's Word says in Ezekiel 22:25-31:

"The conspiracy of her prophets in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in her midst. Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain.

"And her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord God,' when the Lord has not spoken. The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery. They have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without justice. And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them. I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath. I have returned their way upon their heads," declares the Lord God.

That was God's exposé of the failure of the leaders in society at that time—every aspect of leadership.

- The prophets who were to proclaim the word of the Lord were speaking lies in the name of the Lord.
- The priests who were to lead in worship and sacrifices at the temple—you couldn't count on them to lead you into the presence of God and to lead you

in prayer. They were corrupted. They didn't know the difference between what was holy and unholy.

- The kings—whose responsibility it was to protect and defend and order the lives of God's people justly under God's holy Law—they were abusing and oppressing God's people.

Prophets, priests, kings—failure in every sphere of leadership. A true leader, a godly leader, was nowhere to be found. So the case has been building throughout Ezekiel's prophecy, and it now comes to a climax in chapter 34. The reason why God's people are being sent into exile in Babylon—the responsibility for that judgment upon the people of God—in large measure falls on the heads and shoulders of the leaders. And that's what Ezekiel is speaking forth in chapter 34.

When you hear that word “shepherds” in Ezekiel 34, think of prophets, priests and kings—and maybe especially the kings of Israel in this time. Ezekiel indicts them for their failure of leadership. He's not just criticizing them, he's laying the responsibility for the judgment that has now fallen on the leaders. Then we thankfully see a great gleam of hope in the Ezekiel 34:11-24 that shows us God's intervention as the Faithful Shepherd, what God is going to do to remedy the failure of leadership.

The lesson that pervades this whole chapter is this: though human leaders may prove disappointing, you can always rely on the One of God's appointing. Human leaders may disappoint you, but there is One Whom God has appointed, Whom you can always rely upon. We're going to see that as we look at this text in two movements.

1. An Indictment of the Failed Shepherds of Israel - 34:1-10

A. What was at the root, the heart, of the failure of leadership? - Ezekiel 34:1-2

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?”

There's the root of their failure. Their motivation was selfish. They were looking to the flock, not as those for whom they were called to care but as those whom could meet their own needs. They didn't have the attitude of Jesus, Who came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28). Instead, they looked at the flock as existing to serve them, to meet

their needs, rather than their being called to meet the needs of the flock. So for the leaders of Israel, it was not about them caring for the flock, it was about the flock caring for them. It was not about them feeding the flock; it was about them fattening themselves.

This selfish motivation could show up in leadership in different ways. Sometimes it's very overt. I think of Simon the magician (Acts 8:9-13) who wanted the gifts of God for his own aggrandizement. He wanted to look great, so he abused God's gifts and he was called to judgment for it. The apostle Peter warns leaders (1 Peter 5:2) that we're not to shepherd "*for shameful gain, but eagerly.*"

Sometimes that selfish motivation is more subtle. It's when we look to the flock to kind of build ourselves up, to make us feel popular. We'll build a ministry around a man's name. Sometimes a pastor or a leader in a church can look to the flock for a sense of security and acceptance and approval.

As I was thinking about this I was reminded of one of the first books I read early on when I was becoming a pastor that really influenced me. It was by a man named David Hansen. He talked about how he had to deal with these false motivations in his heart when he was entering the ministry. One quote stood out to me.

If the church is a womb that saves and nourishes lonely and impoverished souls, I thought that being a pastor was climbing into the womb for good. I wanted the warmth and acceptance I received every Sunday. I wanted it all the time. Being a pastor seemed like the way to get it....I misconstrued ministry as full-time security in the womb of the church...[but the] call to pastoral to ministry is a call out of the womb of the church into the perilous and painful role of being pregnant with the church, of giving birth to it, of nursing and raising it.

(The Art of Pastoring, pp. 32-33)

B. What was the fruit of their failure in leadership? - Ezekiel 34:3-4

So this selfish desire—not to serve, but to be served—can show up in many subtle and overt ways. But when that motivation is there, and it's not kept under check by the power of the Holy Spirit, it will reap bitter fruit in leadership. Let's look at verses three and four, to see what was the fruit of the failure of leadership in Ezekiel's day.

You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

Now right there is a good summary of the job description of a spiritual leader. It's going to show up again in the next paragraph, and then again in the next paragraph. God

makes it very clear how He wants His sheep to be cared for. The fruit of the failure of leadership—when leadership is motivated by selfish ambition—the sheep get either abused or neglected or both. That was the fruit in Ezekiel’s day. It was the fruit of abuse and neglect. It’s funny how sometimes those two things can go hand in hand.

1. Neglect of the sheep

When you’re fattening yourself and clothing yourself and driving the flock to satisfy your own desires, you’re not taking care of them. Nourishing the sheep takes an investment of time and energy. It doesn’t just happen. There’s a study that needs to go on there, and the Word of God needs to be impacting the shepherd first in order to nourish the flock. But when you’re in it for your own selfish ends, you’re **not going to take that time to nourish the flock of God.**

Or maybe you’ll **withhold truth from God’s flock**, because you want them to think well of you. You want their approval. So you don’t tell them the whole counsel of God because you don’t want to risk their rejection. Or, you **won’t strengthen the weak.** Why? Because that’s not glamorous. That’s going to take time. That’s not necessarily going to make you feel good.

You **won’t heal the sick or bind up the injured.** The gospel has a surgical function. Think of the days of surgery without anesthesia and think about what the doctors had to go through—the kicking and the curses of the patients. Kierkegaard said the pastor must “above all be able to put up with all the rudeness of the sick person without letting it upset him, any more than a physician allows himself to be disturbed by the curses and kicks of a patient during an operation.” A selfish leader won’t put up with that trouble.

You **won’t search for the lost.** You won’t go out in the middle of the night into the dark ravines and the cold and search for the lost and straying sheep. The point is, when you want to be served and not to serve, you’ll neglect to take care of those under your charge, and they will suffer for your neglect.

2. Abuse of the sheep.

Look at the end of Ezekiel 34:4, “...*with force and harshness you have ruled them.*” Here’s how it works. If leaders are ruled by self-interest, they’ll neglect the sheep when it’s not convenient to look after them, and they’ll abuse the sheep when the sheep get in the way of their agenda. They’ll exercise tyranny and control of the flock. The reason

shepherds fail is because they have forgotten Whose flock this is. They've forgotten, "These aren't my sheep, these are God's sheep. This is His flock."

C. What were the consequences of this failure of leadership? - Ezekiel 34:5-6

Notice the word that is repeated three times in these verses.

So [because you neglected them, because you abused them, shepherds] they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

That's what literally happened in Ezekiel's time, during the Exile. They're in Babylon, they're driven away from their homeland, they're dispersed throughout the ancient Near East—but spiritually speaking this is what happens when shepherds fail in the way Ezekiel's confronting them here. The sheep get scattered and they're exposed to all manner of danger. They're vulnerable to the beasts of prey. They're lost and without direction. Human beings cannot function without good leadership, and a failure of leadership exposes people to grave danger.

D. How does God respond to their failure of leadership? - Ezekiel 34:7-10

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As I live, declares the Lord God..." He's taking this seriously. God is taking an oath on His own life here. *"As I live, declares the Lord..."* "I'm going to act on behalf of My sheep. I'm going to step in to the situation." God is going to bring His shepherds into His board room (so to speak) and say, "You're fired. You're done."

Look at what God says in 34:10:

Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue My sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

Now the main truth I come away with from verses 1-10 is that God is sovereign over all shepherds. Over all those who have a responsibility for leadership in the **political realm**—God is sovereign over the shepherds of nations. He's sovereign over the whole Presidential election process. He's sovereign in the **church**, over the shepherds of His flock. He's sovereign in the **family** over the little sheep that are entrusted to our care as fathers and mothers. God is sovereign.

This truth of God's sovereignty ought to comfort us in two ways.

1. It should convict us.

It should convict us in our spheres of leadership to always remember Whose flock this is. Parents, remember your children belong to God. Elders, pastors, remember the church is God's church, purchased with the blood of the Redeemer. The church is precious to Him. It's not our church. It's God's church. Political leaders, remember you have a stewardship from God—a responsibility. Leadership is not a privilege or an entitlement. It's a responsibility to God.

In the church, only God has the right to call you "My people." You are God's people, not "my people." Not any human leader's. So leaders remember that, keep that conviction that this is God's flock and guard against that subtle but very pernicious allure of self-interest. It's in all of us. The most dangerous leaders are the ones who are not aware of the allure of self-interest, who are not guarding against it.

T.S. Eliot was a British playwright who became a Christian about 75 years ago. He has a statement I think is very insightful. He says, "Half the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They don't mean to do harm, but the harm does not interest them...or they don't see it...or they justify it because they are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves."

So they do harm. Leaders, father, elders and pastors—we need to be aware of that allure, that desire to feel important. We must make sure we are not using those entrusted to our care to feed that pernicious desire.

Something that struck me on-line a while back was this prayer directive. It said, "Pray that your influence never surpasses the resources of your God-formed character." Pray that your character will always be growing greater than your influence, because if self starts to rise up in leadership, the effects of it are very ugly and very harmful to the sheep.

2. It should comfort us.

There's also comfort here—comfort to know that when leaders in your life are failing, God takes notice. God won't leave His sheep without a shepherd. God will not leave the failure of His shepherds unaddressed. Although human leaders may prove disappointing, you can always rely on the One of God's appointing.

2. The Intervention of the Faithful Shepherd - 34:11-24

Thankfully we're not left at verse 10. It could be pretty discouraging. But God has said, "I'm going to step in. I'm going to do something here. I'm going to intervene." And look at verses 11-16. Notice how many times God says, "I will."

For thus says the Lord God: "Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And 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 ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares 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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice."

A. What the Faithful Shepherd Does

We see the beauty here of what the Faithful Shepherd does.

1. He intimately knows and observes the specific needs and conditions of His sheep.

Every one of them He knows. Are they **lost**? Are they straying from God? Lost and don't know their way back to the fold? He knows where to find them. Are they **driven away** by the violence of their sinful pastures or the fear of man? He knows how to bring them back.

Are His sheep **loaded down with griefs and sorrows** that are more painful to them than a broken bone? The Shepherd knows how to bind them up, how to restore them to health. If they're **sick of sin**—that loathsome malady that keeps us from loving God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength, He knows how to apply gospel cure to their sinful condition.

And if they're **fat and strong**, if they're arrogant and conceited, saying, "I have need of nothing," not knowing that they are blind and poor and miserable and pitiable and naked—He knows how to humble them. Those who walk in pride He's able to humble.

Whatever our condition, our Faithful Shepherd knows specifically how to minister to our needs. Jesus knows you and how to minister to you right where you're at right now, whatever your condition is.

2. He completely reverses the effects of the failed shepherds' malpractice.

Before in verse six, no one was looking after the sheep. But in verse 11 the Lord Himself looks after them. Before in verses five and six they wandered and were scattered. Now the Lord says in verses 12 and 13, "I will deliver, and I will gather them." Before in verse six they were left all alone on the mountains, exposed to the dangers of the climate and of the beasts. But now in verse 13 the Good Shepherd says, "I'm going to take them up on those mountains and I'm going to feed them and nourish them in the good grazing lands."

Before in verse four they were suffering under brutality, but now in verse 14 their Good Shepherd makes them lie down in green pastures, feeds them without fear. All the neglect they suffered is now going to be compensated with tender, attentive skill and care. That's what God's saying in verses 15 and 16. "Wherever human leaders fail, I can more than amply reverse the effects of their failure and My flock will be well cared for under My leadership."

3. He rescues the flock from themselves (34:16-22).

Wherever there's a failure of leadership in the church, wherever human shepherds become self-centered and self-absorbed and neglect and abuse the flock, there's always going to be some of that bad behavior reflected among the sheep too. The strong sheep will bully the weak sheep.

But God says (in verses 17 and following), "I'm going to come, I'm going to judge between sheep and sheep, and I'm going to make sure the weak sheep are taken care of." God has a particular fondness for weak sheep and makes sure that none of them are overlooked. It's not the mighty, not the strong, not the fat, not the self-satisfied that Jesus came to save. It's the weak and the foolish, the ignorant, the needy, the sick. That's who our Savior reaches, those who realize their need of Him. That's what our Faithful Shepherd does.

B. Who the Faithful Shepherd Is?

Who is He? What's His name? Look at verse 23, toward the end of this section. This is an amazing verse here and it looks at first like a contradiction. God has been saying, "I will do this"—but now look at what He says in verses 23 and 24.

And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken.

How can that be? "God, You've been saying, 'I'm going to do this.' Now You're saying You're going to send David? But David's dead. He's been dead for a long time. You're going to resurrect David?"

No. What God is saying is, "I Myself am going to come down. I'm looking out over the multitudes and I'm seeing them harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, and I Myself am going to come down as a man—a man who is a descendent, who is a son of David. I am going to come in human form." God Himself will be with us, dwelling amongst us, as a Son of David, as our Shepherd.

So it's no wonder when Jesus spoke these words (John 10:11), "*I am the good shepherd*," by the end of that chapter some of the Jews were picking up stones to kill Him. Because they knew Jesus was claiming here. He didn't just say, "I am a good shepherd." He says, "*I am the good shepherd*," the Shepherd of Ezekiel 34. "I am God Himself who has come down to My harassed and helpless flock, and I'm going to be their Good Shepherd."

Jesus contrasts Himself to the failed shepherds of Ezekiel 34 when He says these words, "*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*" (John 10:11). He goes to the cross. He stands in between His weak and harassed flock and all their vicious enemies and He says, "I'm going to take your sin and the judgment you deserve on Myself and I'm going to die in your place and I'm going to be raised from the dead to save you, to defend you, to be your Shepherd forever."

I think of Revelation 7: the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will be among them and will be their Shepherd and He will feed them, satisfy them. This is our Savior, Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd, the great and the good Shepherd.

Application

So let's apply this second point in four ways this morning.

A. Put yourself under the care of the good and faithful Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

You see from this passage how much we need a shepherd, how vulnerable we are without someone to lead us and guide us. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Trust His wisdom to guide you. Believe that Jesus will never neglect or abuse you. Do you believe that? Do you really trust that Jesus will never neglect you? He will never abuse you.

Learn to rely on Him continuously. Throughout the day pray to Him, “Savior, shepherd me. Guide me. Lead me. Give me wisdom. Protect me. Fill me with nourishment from Your Word.” Learn to live in fellowship with your Shepherd day by day. Don’t hide anything from Him. Don’t reserve anything for yourself.

We have a little puppy at home, and we know that if he’s hiding, there’s trouble. So as his shepherd, we have to always know where he’s at. There can be no secrets between Nikko and us. We know all about him. We know his tricks.

Tim Keller said, “Sheep do not have any privacy from their shepherd.” If you say, “Oh Jesus, You can rule my life here in church on Sundays but not in the way I run my business, or not in my relationships with the opposite sex,” then you’re not letting Him be your Shepherd. If you want Jesus to be your Shepherd, you have to hide nothing from Him and reserve nothing for yourself.

If you’re far off this morning, return to the Chief Shepherd. First Peter 2:25 has these beautiful words, “*You were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*” That’s the testimony of every Christian. “I was straying like a sheep but now I’ve returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of my soul.” Let that become your story today. Put yourself under the care of your faithful Shepherd.

B. Imitate your Shepherd’s faithful care.

Imitate His care in the way you care for one another. What are we? A bunch of sheep, a flock of sheep, constantly being weakened by our struggles with sin in this world, prone to wander. We need the care of our Chief Shepherd and He wants to use us in one another’s lives.

Listen to what Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, “*...we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.*” Or Colossians 3:12, “*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.*” So we all have a role to play in shepherding and caring for one another.

It's one of the reasons why our Care Group ministry is so vital to this church, because how else are we going to get to know one another well enough to really exercise this kind of shepherding ministry? Who do you know who is wandering? Who do you know who is weak right now? Who needs the comfort of the gospel? Who needs a word from the living God spoken into their situation? Imitate your Shepherd's care.

3. Despair not over the state of Christ's church.

Are there failed shepherds in the church today? Absolutely. Is there abuse and neglect to flocks? Yes there is, sadly. Does the church look weakened by sin? Yes it does and it always has. But we have One Who intervened for the flock in sending His own Son to die for her and to rise from the dead. And surely He's not going to leave His flock and abandon us now.

I love G.K. Chesterton's statement. About a hundred years ago he said, "At least five times...with the Arian and the Albigensian and the humanist and Voltaire and Darwin...at least five times the Faith has to all appearances gone to the dogs. And in each of these five cases, it was the dog that died." It's the enemies of God that ultimately fail.

Jesus' church and Jesus' gospel will endure. I think of that hymn,

The church shall never perish!
Her dear Lord to defend,
To guide, sustain and cherish
Is with her to the end.

(The Church's One Foundation by Samuel J. Stone & Samuel S. Wesley)

So we have hope over the state of the church because the church has a faithful Shepherd.

4. Don't let the failures of human shepherds make you resistant to being led.

You know, Jesus has stepped in. He's the Good Shepherd. But who's He using today to shepherd His flock? He's appointed deputies, undershepherds. He says to them, "Observe how I have shepherded you. Now go in My name and do likewise. Feed My sheep. Tend My flock." Jesus still uses men—redeemed men, men who must give an account, men who have been captivated by the Savior's care and love, who have been called by God to shepherd His flock.

So I say to you, friends, church membership and accountability to a local church—it's never going to be perfect. You're never going to join a church where you're never going to be disappointed. But it's not optional either. It's not optional. If you're a sheep, you need a

shepherd. And it will not suffice to say, “Well, Jesus is my Shepherd,” because Jesus has appointed undershepherds to watch over your souls.

So submit yourself to the care of the local church. Don’t let cynicism creep in because human leaders fail. Maybe it would help sometimes to ask yourself, “If I was in leadership, how quickly would my faults and failures become evident?”

Look for leaders who submit themselves to the Chief Shepherd and come under His care by placing yourself under their care. Let their leadership serve as a reflection of Christ to you and do not gaze on the reflection, but instead focus on the reality of Christ Himself, our faithful Shepherd. When human leaders fail and disappoint you, look to the One Whom God has appointed. He will never fail you or forsake you.

I was struck by this beautiful prayer request from the first century Christian leader Ignatius of Antioch. This came from the first century, way back close to the time of Jesus. Every one of us should pray this for ourselves in our spheres of leadership—in the home, in the community and in the church—and we should pray this for our leaders. I would encourage you to pray this for your pastor, elders, Care Group facilitators and others church leaders.

These are men who’ve been called to lead and shepherd, to equip you the flock to shepherd one another. Think about the calling God has given them as it’s been described here in Ezekiel 34, and I want you to hear this prayer request from Ignatius of Antioch who said,

Please pray for me,
that I may have both spiritual and physical strength to perform my duties;
that I may not only speak the truth but become the truth;
that I may not only be called a Christian, but also live like a Christian.
Yet I do not want people to look to me as an example,
for at best I can only be a pale reflection of Christ Jesus;
let people look away from the reflection and turn to the reality.
Christianity is not a matter of persuading people of particular ideas,
but of inviting them to share in the greatness of Christ.
So pray that I may never fall into the trap of impressing people with clever speech,
but instead I may learn to speak with humility,
desiring only to impress people with Christ himself.

Father, I thank You for Your church and Your commitment to her. Father, we cannot conceive of the love You have for Your people, Your bride, the body for which Your Son died. The depths of Your love—who can measure? You fully supply all our needs. You have shown Your faithfulness again and again, restoring me, comforting me. Thank You

Lord for Your shepherding ministry. Thank You for Your intervention. When shepherds fail, You remain faithful.

God, we thank You for the men who lead Care Groups, for the men who serve as elders in this church. This is a high and holy calling that You've placed on their lives, and we pray that You would endue them with much faith to see Jesus. We pray that they would be captivated by Him. We pray Lord that the mind of Christ our Savior would live in us from day to day, that we would come into this flock not to be served but to serve.

Give us wisdom and strength to feed those who need nourishment—which is all of us. Help us Lord to strengthen the weak, to bind up the sick and the injured and the diseased, to bring Your healing gospel to bear. Lord, help us be men who are seeking the straying and gathering in the lost.

In all these things, Lord, we pray that we would be equipping this whole body to shepherd one another in the love of Christ. Father, we pray that it would not be the reflection, but Christ Himself Who is the object of our attention. Lord, may people forget the channel and see Jesus only. So we look to Him now and pray that He would increase and we would decrease, in Your holy name, Amen.

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