

RELIGION

The Lord is our shepherd

Ezekiel 34:23-31

It is easy for a person to develop a one-sided picture of God. Yes, there is a judgmental side of our heavenly father — the creator of the universe. This fact produces the need for a savior of the lost human race. Judgment against sin must be carried out, or there would be a mar on his holiness and his holy nature. Since the introduction of sin into the human race (Genesis 3:1-6), there has been a need for “judgment to be poured out.” The Old Testament sacrifices allowed the animal to “suffer and die” for the one who had sinned. The Old Testament prophets spoke — and wrote — of a coming one who would be the perfect lamb for the sacrifice for all mankind. John 1:29. Until this one came into the world, this fact was only a hope for the nation of Israel, and all the world.

Through the message of Ezekiel — and other divinely inspired messengers — the fact of hope was given to Israel and to all the human race. The ministry of

Ezekiel was to the group of captives in the land of Babylon. His personal life was a kind of living parable of the love of God for his people. Yes, there were messages of judgment that were given by Ezekiel. Yet, the care of the father for the wayward children was declared in a way that the painted quite clear pictures for the hearers and readers.

These captives were familiar with the writings of the psalmist-king, David. They had come from a land that knew the necessity of sheep being a part of the total economic system. They were, also, familiar with the nature of sheep and their constant need for a shepherd. The divinely-inspired words of the prophet painted a vivid picture for his hearers. “And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; and he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd.” Ezekiel 34:23.

As captives in a foreign land, it was easy for these prisoners-of-war to think that God

Sunday School Lesson

Rev. James Temples



had forsaken them. Psalm 137:4. However, they were given a divine promise. “And I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David a prince among them; I the Lord have spoken it.” Ezekiel 34:24. Those to whom Ezekiel ministered knew that the second king of Israel had been dead for centuries. Thus, they realized that the one of whom the prophet spoke was the offspring of the ancient king. 2 Samuel 7:16.

These captives were not ignorant of the teachings of Moses and the Old Testament law, regarding the promises to their forefathers. They understood the picture of the covenant and the significance of the term. However, Ezekiel spoke to them of a covenant that exceeded that which they had known in the past. “And I will make

with them a covenant of peace, and will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land: and they shall dwell safely in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods.” Ezekiel 34:25. Thus, the promise is for divine help and protection wherever the people would desire to go.

This “hope yet to be fulfilled” gave assurance to these captives that Jehovah had not forgotten them, even in their “strange land.” “And I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing; and I will cause the shower to come down in his season; there shall be showers of blessing.” Ezekiel 34:26.

The land of Israel had been overrun by their captors. There seemed to have been little care for the trees that had produced some of the staple foods for the people. At times the cropland was intentionally ruined by captors. A divine promise was given. “And the tree of the field shall yield her fruit, and the earth shall yield her increase, and they shall be safe in their land, and shall know that I am the

Lord, when I have broken the bands of their yoke, and delivered them out of the hand of those that served themselves of them.” Ezekiel 34:27.

These people knew that their history had been scarred by the affects of captors who had attempted to ruin them as a nation. At some future time, this situation would change. “And they shall no more be a prey to the heathen nations, neither shall the beast of the land devour them; but they shall dwell safely, and none shall make them afraid.” Ezekiel 34:28.

As these people lived the lives of captives, words of future hope showed that — as a nation — they would not be completely destroyed. Even though these individuals might not see the fulfillment of the words of the prophets, hope and assurance would help them to continue to keep their faith in the God of their forefathers. “And I will raise up for them a plant of renown, and they shall be no more consumed with hunger in the land, neither bear the shame of

the heathen any more.” Ezekiel 34:29.

Assurance is given. “Thus shall they know that I the Lord their God am with them, and that they, even the house of Israel, are my people, saith the Lord God.” Ezekiel 34:30. The shepherd spoke — “And ye my flock, the flock of my pasture, are men, and I am your God, saith the Lord God.” Ezekiel 34:31; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 5:4. Are you faithfully following the shepherd? If not, please surrender to his leading, today. Inner peace can come into your life. John 14:27.

Rev. James C. Temples' Sunday School Lesson has appeared in the Early County News each week since 1967. A native of Early County, Rev. Temples taught in public schools 32 years and 10 years at Southeastern College of Assemblies of God, in Lakeland, Florida. He also served as pastor and evangelist during those years. He can be contacted at P.O. Box 1569, Auburndale, Fla. 33823; 863-965-0157. Email: jctjet@aol.com.

Let go of your past and follow Jesus

Today's sermon will take two parables instead of one. These two parables are inseparable because they tell us a tale that is one in the same. The two parables reveal two faces of grace that take us to the very same place, the kingdom of God. Matthew 13:44-46.

The Two Parables

The parable in verse 44 is a story of discovered treasure. The ancient land of Israel was a constant battlefield. When a man went to war, the best thing he could do with his valuables would be to bury them. Often the man would not survive the battle. Since he alone knew where the treasure was buried, the buried treasure became the hidden treasure in Jesus' story.

One day a common laborer comes to clear a field for his boss' planting or building. The shovel hits the ground in just the right spot,

and hidden treasure is discovered. Knowing that whatever is discovered on land belongs to the land owner, the employee shrewdly puts the treasure back in to the ground, makes a deal with his employer to purchase the land for himself, thus acquiring the treasure.

This parable is not told to debate the morality of a business transaction. This parable tells a simple story. When you unexpectedly find what you've always wanted, you gladly give up everything else to get it.

The parable in verses 45-46 is a story of a discovered pearl. Pearls were a new and valuable commodity in Jesus' day. Many men made it their ambition to discover them. None of them came cheap, but certainly some pearls were worth more than others.

A merchant makes it his business to make a

The Gospel Truth

Dr. Charles DeVane Jr. First Baptist Church



living off of pearls. He wheels and deals, schemes and dreams, and trades for decades to get a collection of pearls. Yet he yearns for the perfect pearl. One day his search comes to an end. There it is, the pearl of great price, the pearl that requires him to give up all other pearls in order to obtain it. Then, the most important transaction of his life is made.

This parable is not told to give advice on investments. This parable tells a simple story. When you finally find what you've always wanted, you gladly give up everything else to get it.

The Two Faces of Grace

These two parables obviously tell a similar tale. When you unexpectedly find what you've always wanted, you gladly give up everything else to get it. And, when you finally find what you've

always wanted, you gladly give up everything else to get it.

Notice the difference between the parables, though. One man found his treasure unexpectedly. The other man found his treasure after a long and desperate search. These are the two faces of grace.

Salvation, the key to the kingdom of God, is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Neither point of either parable would imply for a moment that salvation can be bought. But the two parables put together show us that the grace that brings salvation can arrive in our lives from two points of view.

Look at the face of the field hand. It shows how the sovereignty of God puts grace into your life. This man was not looking for treasure, he was simply clearing a field. The kingdom of God dropped into his life like an atomic bomb, changing everything. To those who do not and cannot seek the Lord, the Lord reveals himself by unexpected, amazing grace.

Look at the face of the pearl merchant. It shows that it is the

responsibility of man to pursue grace until he finds it. This man was looking for that one true pearl. Then the kingdom of God appeared to him like the face of an angel, changing everything. Those who seek the Lord with all their heart will find what they are looking for when the Lord reveals himself by amazing grace.

The Apostle Paul can be put nicely into both parables. On the Damascus Road, he was not looking to follow Jesus, only to kill Jesus' followers. In the blinding light of unexpected, amazing grace, Paul was put into the kingdom of God. Yet this very kingdom is what Paul had pursued all of his life, albeit wrongly through religious rules and regulations. But when Paul finally found the true and living word of God, amazing grace wrote a new story in his life.

The Way Into The One and Only Kingdom of God

The way begins with discovery. Maybe it is shown to you by your parents, a pastor, or perhaps a good friend. Maybe it comes in a flash of light, or maybe it comes as the final

answer to the question you have been asking all of your life. But there it is and you can see it. It is a treasure, it is a pearl, it is the Lord Jesus Christ, showing you his salvation, forgiveness, eternal life, the kingdom of God.

Discovery demands decision. Will I keep what I have and give up what I don't, or will I surrender it all to have what I have not? Consider the words of the great missionary martyr Jim Eliot, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” The field hand and the pearl merchant gave up resources that would eventually run out for a prize that would never run dry.

The decision is discipleship, and discipleship is costly. Christ's kingdom is not for mere decision-makers, it is only for true disciples. A disciple repents and lets go of the past possessions of life. A disciple believes convincingly that Jesus is the greatest treasure in this life and the life to come. A disciple gladly and willingly lets go and grabs hold. This is repentance, faith, entrance, and access into the one and only kingdom of God.

THANKS

I would like to thank our many friends, neighbors and family members for such caring spirits through prayers, food, flowers, cards, visits and monetary gifts given to us during my wife Patricia's stay in the hospital and as she continues to recover at home.

A special thanks to Pastor Gloria Wynds and the New Prospect Church family, Early Memorial ER and EMS, and last, but not least, Dr. Michael Pinson and the cardiology department of SEMC. Our prayer is that God's richness continues to be

in your lives.

Charles Tolbert Jr.



We, the family and extended family of the late Rev. Lonzie Charles Butler, who departed Feb. 2, 2009, in Salem, N.J., would like to extend our gratitude for the many visits, the kind words, prayers, and all the phone calls during the loss of our son, brother, father, grandfather and friend. We are truly the community that prays together and stays together. May God bless each and every one of you.

Thank you, The Butler family

CHURCH NEWS

Mt. Olive M.B.

Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church will have revival services March 3 through March 5 at 7:30 p.m. Rev. Donnie Ray Hall will be the guest speaker. Everyone is invited to attend.

St. Mary's M.B.

St. Mary's Missionary

Baptist Church will have their annual choir night March 7 at 6 p.m. Everyone is invited to attend.

Union Church

Union Church will celebrate their 146th church anniversary Sunday, March 8 at 11 a.m. Everyone is invited to attend.

Blakely Senior Center

310 Meadowbrook Drive

Daily Events

March 9 — Rhythm band practice - 10:30-11:30. Lunch: BBQ riblets, cole slaw, baked beans, wheat bun, fruit crisp.

March 10 — Physical fitness - 10:15 a.m. - 11 a.m. Wheel of Fortune - 11 a.m. Lunch: Beef and noodles, squash and onions, English peas, wheat roll, fresh fruit.

March 11 — Bingo - 10:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. Lunch: Salisbury steak and tomatoes, okra and tomatoes, peas with snaps, corn muffin, pineapple Jello.

March 12 — Physical fitness - 10:15 a.m. - 11 a.m. Fire Dept. - 11 a.m. Lunch: Meatballs and gravy, mixed veggies, pinto beans, wheat roll, fresh fruit.

March 13 — Physical fitness - 10:15 a.m. 11 a.m. Rev. Fred Odom, devotional - 11 a.m. Lunch: Spiced chicken, steamed cabbage, parsley potatoes, wheat roll, heavenly delight.

Anyone 60 and over is invited to join us for activities and/or lunch. One day notice is needed for lunch. Call 723-8700. Arlington Senior Center offers the same daily meals.

Attend the Church of Your Choice This Sunday