

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds,

Session 8, Shepherd King

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All right, so today we're diving into something that might sound kind of simple at first glance, the shepherd king, but stick with us because there's actually way more to unpack here than you might think. Absolutely. We're looking at some awesome lecture notes from an Old Testament scholar, Dr. Fowler, and he goes deep on the historical and metaphorical side of this title.

You know what's really fascinating is that shepherd wasn't just about, you know, tending sheep. It was a powerful royal title in the ancient Near East. And when you understand that, it like totally changes how you read certain parts of the Bible.

Okay, so let's break this down. Dr. Fowler starts by talking about this ancient practice in Israel called release. Can you give us the rundown on that? So imagine a society where, like, every seven years, all debts are wiped clean.

Wow. And any land that had been sold because of hardship is returned to its original owners. That's release in a nutshell.

Wow. That's pretty radical for the ancient world. It really was.

And here's where it gets interesting. The king was seen as the one enacting this release, like a benevolent ruler, making sure there's fairness for his people. So it wasn't just some economic policy.

It was tied to the king's authority and image. Exactly. And get this, Mesopotamian kings often called themselves shepherds when they enacted the release.

Hold on. Mesopotamian kings? Yeah. That's outside of Israel, right? Right.

Why would they use that term? That's the key insight here. Okay. It shows that this connection between shepherd and king wasn't just an Israelite thing.

It was all over the ancient Near East. It suggests that calling yourself a shepherd was a way for kings to legitimize their rule, to present themselves as caring protectors of their people, even when they were also powerful and sometimes ruthless rulers. So it was almost like ancient PR.

You could say that, but it also reflects a deeper truth about how ancient people viewed their leaders. They wanted a king who was strong and capable, but also just and compassionate. It makes you wonder if that longing for a good king is still something we feel today.

Absolutely. But let's get back to how this connects to the Bible. Dr. Fowler points out that we see hints of this shepherd-king imagery in Genesis 1 and 2. God is portrayed as the

provider and protector of Adam and Eve, which are like the two key aspects of a shepherd-king.

He provides for their needs and safeguards them from harm. I see the connection, but it's subtle. Yeah.

Does it become more explicit in the Old Testament? Yes, it does. In Genesis 48.15, we get the first explicit use of the word shepherd to describe God. It's part of Jacob's blessing to Joseph's sons.

And he specifically says, That's powerful. Yeah. Jacob is acknowledging that God has been his provider and protector throughout his entire life using this ancient and loaded metaphor.

Exactly. And it's not just a passing reference. In Genesis 49.24, we see shepherd and rock used together to describe Joseph, further connecting this imagery to strength, protection, and leadership.

So we're seeing how this shepherd idea is woven into the very fabric of the early biblical narratives. And it doesn't stop there. And this imagery evolves and deepens as we move through the Old Testament, especially when we get to the Psalms.

Well, you can't talk about shepherds in the Bible without mentioning the most famous one of all, Psalm 23. But Dr. Fowler has a pretty surprising take on that, right? He does. Most people read Psalm 23 as a sweet little poem about sheep and shepherds.

But if we understand shepherd as a royal title, the whole psalm takes on a whole new dimension. Okay. I'm intrigued.

How does that change things? Think about it. The first half of the psalm focuses on God's provision. Green pastures, quiet waters, restored soul.

It's all about God providing for the needs of his people. Just like a good king would. That makes sense.

It's like God is ensuring the well-being of his subjects. Right. But then the second half shifts to God's protection.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you. You are with me; your rod and your staff. They comfort me.

Wow. We've got enemies lurking, the threat of death. Right.

And God as a warrior king offering protection and comfort in the midst of danger. Wow. That's a powerful image.

It's not just a gentle shepherd tending his flock. It's a king defending his people. Exactly.

And to really drive this point home, Dr. Fowler brings up a fascinating historical tidbit. An Assyrian king named Tukulti-Ninurta had an inscription that is strikingly similar to Psalm 23. He boasts about leading his people to green pastures and protecting them from enemies.

So this wasn't just poetic imagery. It was rooted in the real-world language and experience of ancient kingship. Precisely.

And there's even an article by scholar Pamela Milne that connects the language of Psalm 23 to the Exodus wanderings, further emphasizing God's kingship over Israel. Okay. It's like this theme is echoing throughout the entire Old Testament.

Okay. So we're starting to see how this shepherd king concept isn't just some obscure academic theory. Right.

It's a powerful framework for understanding God's relationship with his people. And it doesn't stop there. The shepherd-king imagery also points forward to Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of this ancient archetype.

Now that's where things get really interesting, but we'll have to save that conversation for the next part of our deep dive. So we were just talking about how the shepherd king imagery in the Old Testament points forward to Jesus. And this is where things get really exciting.

Yeah. Because Jesus doesn't just fulfill this imagery. Yeah.

He completely redefines it. Okay. So how does Jesus take this shepherd-king idea and make it his own? Well, first we have to remember that Jesus is operating within a specific cultural context.

His audience would have been familiar with all the Old Testament passages we've been talking about. Yeah. They would have known about David as the shepherd king.

Right. About God as the shepherd of Israel and about the prophecies of a future messianic shepherd. So when Jesus starts talking about sheep and shepherds, it's not just random imagery.

It's loaded with meaning. Exactly. He's tapping into this rich tapestry of biblical imagery and using it to make profound claims about his own identity and mission.

And one of the key places where he does this is in Micah 5.2 to 4, right? Right. Dr. Fowler pointed that out in his notes. Micah prophesies about a ruler who will come from Bethlehem and shepherd his flock.

Okay. And guess what? What? Jesus is born in Bethlehem. Right.

It's like the Old Testament is setting the stage for Jesus's arrival as the ultimate shepherd king. It's all starting to click into place. Yeah.

But there's another passage that Dr. Fowler says is crucial for understanding Jesus as the good shepherd: Ezekiel 34. Ah, yes. Ezekiel 34 is fascinating because it's the only chapter in

the entire Old Testament that uses this extended allegory of shepherds and sheep to describe God's relationship with Israel.

Okay. And it's not a pretty picture. What do you mean? Well, Ezekiel paints this vivid picture of Israel's leaders as bad shepherds who have neglected and exploited the flock.

They've been selfish, greedy, and more concerned with their own well-being than the well-being of the people they're supposed to be leading. That sounds all too familiar, unfortunately. Bad leadership is a problem in every era.

It is, but here's the good news. Okay. Ezekiel 34 doesn't end with condemnation.

Okay. God promises to remove these bad shepherds and appoint a new shepherd, a righteous ruler from the line of David who will truly care for his flock. So it's a message of hope and restoration.

Absolutely. And this is where the connection to Jesus becomes really clear. Dr. Fowler says that Ezekiel 34 is the direct background for John 10, where Jesus calls himself the good shepherd.

So let's dive into John 10. What's so special about this passage? Well, first we have to remember that John's gospel is very intentional in how it portrays Jesus. Right.

John isn't just telling stories about Jesus. He's presenting a theological argument. Okay.

About who Jesus is and what he came to do. Right. John's gospel is all about revealing Jesus's divine identity and mission.

Exactly. And so when Jesus shows up in John 9 and heals a blind man, it's not just a random act of kindness. Right.

It's a sign that points back to those Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah who will open the eyes of the blind. It's like John is saying, look, Jesus is fulfilling the script. He's the real deal.

And then we get to John 10, and Jesus takes this shepherding imagery to a whole new level. Oh, okay. He contrasts himself with the thieves and robbers who come to steal, kill, and destroy.

Right. He's saying, I am the true shepherd, the one who protects and cares for my sheep. Don't be fooled by the imposters.

There's a real sense of urgency in his words, isn't there? Yeah. Like he's warning his followers about the dangers of false leadership. Absolutely.

And then he makes this incredible statement. Yeah. I am the gate for the sheep.

Okay. He's not just the shepherd. Right.

He's the only way to enter into true safety and security. That's a powerful image. It's like he's saying, if you want to find real life, real protection, real purpose, you have to come through me.

And then he goes on to say, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. This is huge.

Yeah. It connects back to that idea of the smitten shepherd we saw in Zachariah. Right.

The shepherd who is struck down and suffers for his flock. Zachariah 13.7 even says, strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. Exactly.

So when Jesus says, I am the good shepherd who lays down his life, it's not just a nice sentiment. Right. It's a foreshadowing of his death on the cross.

Wow. He's telling us that true leadership involves sacrifice, even to the point of death. Wow.

That's a challenging concept. Yeah. It means that being a follower of Jesus isn't just about feeling good or having a comfortable life.

Right. It's about being willing to follow him, even when it's difficult. Yeah.

Even when it costs us something. You're absolutely right. And this idea of sacrifice is central to Jesus's entire ministry.

He didn't come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. But there's more to this good shepherd imagery than just sacrifice, isn't there? Right. It's also about relationship.

You're right. Jesus emphasizes this over and over again in John 10. Okay.

He says, I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Right. There's this beautiful sense of intimacy and connection between the shepherd and his flock.

Yeah. It's not just about a king ruling over his subjects. Right.

It's about a loving shepherd caring for his sheep. And this idea of knowing is really important in John's gospel, isn't it? Yeah. It's about more than just intellectual knowledge.

Right. It's about a deep, personal, experiential connection. Exactly.

And Jesus connects this knowing to his relationship with God the Father. He says, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep. Wow.

So his love for us is an extension of God's love for him. Right. It's this incredible, unbreakable bond that we get to be a part of.

That's mind-blowing. Yeah. But then Jesus goes on to say something really interesting.

What's that? And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd. Yes.

This is such a radical statement. Jesus is expanding his mission beyond the boundaries of Israel. He's saying that his flock includes people from all nations and backgrounds.

The vision of unity and inclusivity was completely revolutionary in his time. It still is. In a world that's so divided and fragmented, Jesus is offering us a vision of a community.

Right. Everyone is welcome. Everyone is loved.

Everyone belongs. And that's the beauty of this shepherd-king metaphor. Yeah.

It helps us understand that Jesus's kingship is unlike any other. It's a kingship of love, sacrifice, and inclusion. Right.

But it also raises an important question. Oh, what's that? So if Jesus is inviting everyone into this one flock, this new community where he's the good shepherd, what does that mean for us as his followers? How should we be thinking about our role in all of this? That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? And I think it gets to the heart of what it means to live as a Christian. If we truly believe that Jesus is the good shepherd, then we have to be willing to be his sheep.

Okay. That makes sense. But what does it actually look like to be a sheep in Jesus's flock? It can't just be about showing up to church every Sunday, can it? You're absolutely right.

It goes much deeper than that. Being a sheep in Jesus's flock means surrendering our lives to him, completely trusting him implicitly and allowing him to lead us. That sounds simple enough, but in practice, I think one of the hardest things to do is surrendering control, letting go of our own plans and agendas, and trusting that Jesus knows what's best for us.

You hit the nail on the head. It's a daily challenge. But think about it this way.

Just like a shepherd leads his sheep to green pastures and quiet waters, Jesus leads us to places of spiritual nourishment and rest. He knows what we need, even when we don't. But let's be honest, the path Jesus leads us on isn't always easy or comfortable.

Sometimes it's downright difficult and even painful. That's true. Following Jesus doesn't exempt us from the hardships of life.

In fact, he warned us that we would face troubles in this world. But he also said, Take heart. I have overcome the world.

That's a good reminder. We're not alone in our struggles. Jesus is with us every step of the way, guiding us, protecting us, and comforting us, even in the midst of the toughest trials.

Exactly. He's that good shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, leaving the ninety-nine to find the one. No matter how far we stray or how lost we feel, he never gives up on us.

His love is relentless and unconditional. That's so encouraging. It gives me the courage to keep going, even when I feel like I'm failing or when I don't understand what God is doing.

And remember, we're not meant to walk this path alone. We're part of a flock, a community of believers who are all journeying together. Right.

We need each other for support, encouragement, and accountability. We can learn from each other's experiences, help each other up when we fall, and spur each other on towards spiritual maturity. And that's where this idea of the release we talked about earlier comes in again.

When we surrender our lives to Jesus, he not only sets us free from sin, but he also releases us into community. He breaks down the walls that divide us and creates this incredible new family where everyone belongs. It's like he's taking those fragmented pieces of our lives and weaving them together into this beautiful tapestry of love and unity.

And that's what makes his kingdom so radical and so appealing. It challenges all our human prejudices and preconceptions, offering a vision of a world where love and justice reign, where everyone is valued and where everyone has a place at the table. So as we wrap up this deep dive, what would you say is the most important thing for us to remember about being sheep in Jesus's flock? I think it boils down to this.

It's about trust, trusting that Jesus is the good shepherd who knows what's best for us. Trusting that he will lead us to places of green pastures and quiet waters, even if the path gets bumpy along the way. Trusting that he'll never leave us or forsake us, even when we make mistakes or wander off course.

And trusting that he's building something beautiful and lasting in this world, something that we get to be a part of. That's a great way to put it. It's all about trust.

And as we learn to trust Jesus more and more, I think we'll find that our lives become more joyful, more peaceful, and more purposeful. We'll start to see the world through his eyes, and we'll be filled with the passion to share his love and grace with everyone we meet. Well, that's it for a deep dive this week.

Thanks for joining us, and we'll see you next time.