

The Shepherd King

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[0 : 0 0] Well, for a few minutes this morning I'd like us to turn back to Matthew chapter 2. And I'll just read again, verses 1 to 6, but we're going to be focusing on the last half of verse 6 in particular. Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the King, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, Where is he who's been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose, and I've come to worship him.

When Herod the King heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. And they told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, and you of Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people, Israel. And in particular, I want to focus on the words that we have at the very end, where Matthew records the fact that the prophecy was made in the Old Testament that a ruler would come who would shepherd my people, Israel. And that title today is the Shepard King. I want you to start by imagining a traditional nativity scene. We'll have seen many of these over the past few days, and you can picture it in your mind. Often we'll have the image of a stable, but it may well have been, well, it probably was more likely just a cave, or perhaps just a wee shelter at the end of a house we don't know for certain. But you can imagine it in your mind, and think about who's there. You've got Mary and Joseph, you picture animals, you picture the manger with the baby lying there, and you picture shepherds, because we know that the shepherds came to see Mary and Joseph, and they found the baby lying in the manger. Probably shouldn't imagine wise men at the nativity scene, because it's probably several months later that they came. But that's okay, that's just a detail, I suppose.

What I want you to think about is the shepherds. Now, we don't know exactly how many shepherds there were, but what we do know is that in that nativity scene, when the shepherds came and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, there was one shepherd that was particularly important.

There's one shepherd who is chief. And the question we've got to ask is, which one is the chief shepherd? And the answer is that the chief shepherd is the baby lying in the manger. And this is where we've been reminded of one of the many big themes that runs right through the whole Bible, the fact that Jesus is the shepherd who will look after God's people. Jesus, as we have in these words, is the ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

In other words, Jesus is the shepherd king. And I want us just to think about this a little bit more today and to unpack exactly what that means, because this is a very important theme that runs through the whole of the Bible.

[3 : 3 7] We're going to start with a list of prominent figures from the Old Testament. Here they are, Abel, Abraham, Jacob, who is also known as Israel, Rachel, his wife, Moses, and David.

These are all very prominent in the Old Testament narrative. They all have one thing in common. They were shepherds, every one of them. And the Old Testament reveals to us the characteristics of what a shepherd should look like. I'm just going to go through four verses quickly because they highlight things that shepherds should do. Isaiah 40 speaks about a shepherd tending his flock, gathering the lambs, carrying them, gently leading them. Amos 3 speaks about rescuing the shepherds, even rescuing the flock, even the flock that's actually been killed. The shepherd will still go and rescue from the mouth of the lion. And what remains, there's that sense of rescue from danger. Micah 5 speaks of standing and shepherding his flock so that they shall dwell secure. And Psalm 23, we have that beautiful image where the Lord makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still water. These verses and many others like them tell us what a good shepherd looks like. And it's reminding us that there's certain key things that a shepherd needs to do. And we can summarise them under these headings here. A shepherd will lead and guide his flock. A shepherd will provide food and water. A shepherd carries the weak and hurt. The shepherd gathers the lost or wandering. The shepherd protects the flock from danger. And these are a great reminder of some key truths around the shepherd and the flock. It's a great reminder that a flock was completely dependent on the shepherd to lead them and show them the way to go. That was particularly important in terms of provision in the ancient Near East because it's not like here where you've got grass and water everywhere. In the ancient Near East you had to travel from place to place to find water and to find pasture. Because of all that travelling, there was often the case where animals would get hurt or injured. The shepherd in that situation would carry them to make sure that they're not left behind.

Likewise they could easily wander off and again a shepherd has to go chasing after them. The shepherd is never casual or careless, always watchful, always ready to go after them. And throughout all of that, travelling, all of that search for pasture, there was the constant threat from predators. And a shepherd's job was to keep them safe. David spoke about that when he said that when he shepherd his sheep for his father, sometimes a lion or a bear would come and take a lamb from the flock and he would go after the lion or the bear and deliver the animal from its mouth. And that's a reminder that a shepherd has to be incredibly courageous. And I think this is where it's important, you know, if you were to Google shepherd, the images you probably would get up would be kind of quite tranquil, wouldn't they? There'd be a lovely kind of green grass field and you maybe have a shepherd standing with a crook watching over some perfectly well behaved sheep on a beautiful summer day and it all looks a bit tranquil, maybe even a wee bit soft. But of course the real truth is that being a shepherd is not a soft job at all. That's still true today for anybody who has to look after sheep, but in the Old Testament it was even more so. If you were a shepherd in the Old Testament, you had to be ready to be a lion killer. So to be a shepherd in the Old Testament, you needed the wisdom to navigate vast areas of wilderness to provide for the flock all year round. You needed the stamina and the determination to search out for an animal that's wandered off. You needed to be strong enough and brave enough to kill a lion or a bear and you needed to be gentle enough to carry a lamb that was hurt. And the result of that is that with a good shepherd, the flock is safe and secure, the flock is free from hunger, from fear or from isolation. A shepherd was such an important role in the

Old Testament. But in the Old Testament, there's two crucial links that are made between shepherding and prominent aspects of the life of Old Testament Israel. The role of the shepherd is linked with two crucial things. And the first is that there's a key link between shepherding and leadership. So in biblical times, a ruler or a leader was regarded as a shepherd. So for example, when Moses appointed Joshua to be his replacement, it says, let the Lord, Moses said, let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in that the congregation of the Lord may not be as a sheep that have no shepherd. And it's so easy to see why this imagery is used. A leader needs to be wise because they need to direct the people and rule over them. A leader needs to provide for the needs of his subjects. A leader needs to help those who are vulnerable. A leader needs to protect his people. It's a reminder that a good leader is a good shepherd. And this is why in the

Old Testament, the definitive model of leadership is David. He was the shepherd who became Israel's greatest king. And it's reminding us that shepherding is a key leadership skill in the Old Testament. And one of the things that God hated in the Old Testament was when rulers failed to shepherd their flocks. And if you read a prophecy, whether it's Isaiah or Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Zechariah, they all issue stark warnings and stark rebukes against Israel's leaders who have failed to shepherd their people. Perhaps the most powerful example of that is in Ezekiel chapter 34. And I'll just read these verses one to five because it's such a stark rebuke of the leadership of Israel. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of Man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. And that's not talking about the shepherds who look after the sheep that's talking about the leaders. Prophecy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophecy and say to them, even to the shepherds, thus says the Lord God,

[11 : 12] Ah, shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, you do not feed the sheep. The weak, you've not strengthened, the sick you've not healed, the injured you've not bound up, the strayed you've not brought back, the lost you've not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because they were no shepherd and they became food for all the wild beasts. When leaders exploited their people, when they abandoned the weak, when they only looked after themselves, it was utterly appalling in the sight of God. Now I want to just pause for a wee moment there because for everyone here, there's a lot of leaders in this room. Now none of us are kings or queens, but there are many people here who hold positions of leadership and responsibility over others. That might be in our workplace, so there's teachers, supervisors, business partners, team leaders, in our homes, there's parents, even big brothers and sisters.

In the church there's elders and deacons and others who have leadership roles. In many ways, many of us here, if not all of us, in one way or another, are bosses. And all of that means that this biblical imagery of shepherding applies to how we behave from Monday to Friday at work and how we behave 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in our homes. So what would a biblical shepherd boss look like? So if you're a boss yourself, if you're in a position of authority, think about yourself, or if you're under a boss at work or have been over years, for many years, think about them. What would a biblical boss look like? Well, they would lead the people under them. They would guide their colleagues and staff, they'd show them where they need to go, show them how to get there. They would provide for them, whether that's colleagues or pupils or family members or even part of a volunteer team that you're involved in, providing what you need in order to flourish. They would be brave, protecting their staff and colleagues when things go wrong, never exposing them to blame in order to protect themselves. They'd need courage to warn the people under them against danger.

They'd need wisdom to bring people back if they've wandered off or made mistakes. And they would need to be really gentle with those who are struggling, protecting those who are most vulnerable, restoring them back to health and full participation in the flock. Does anybody have a boss like that? Or have you ever, those of you who may be retired now, did you ever have a boss like that? Those of you who are bosses, are you a boss like that? Now, this is so important because every week of our lives, we lead other people. All of us do that in different contexts and in different settings. How brilliant it would be if people were leaders according to the biblical model. And the key thing for every

Christian to think about is the fact that you can be like that. You can be the boss, the leader, the supervisor, the parent, the colleague, the volunteer, the chairperson of the committee that you're involved in, in the community. You can have that position of leadership and you can be an incredibly powerful witness. And all you've got to do is follow the model that the Bible is giving us. It's always the case that as Christians we should be the best people to work for. We should be the best examples of good leaders.

And this is where we see a really important lesson that I think it's crucial to recognize because it's one that society around us gets wrong all the time. Most of the time in the world today we judge the quality of leadership by the health of the leader. So the quality of the leadership is judged according to the health of the leader. So how do you know if a business is doing well? Well, if the boss has got a big house or if they've got a fancy car, then the business must be doing well. A team at work must be doing well if the boss is hitting the targets, whether it's the bank manager or the supervisor in the hospital or whatever it may be, if you're hitting the targets, getting done what needs to be done.

[17 : 06] And even a church can be judged healthy if the minister is drawing crowds and if they've got a great following on Twitter or whatever else it might be. We can so easily judge the health of a workplace or a church by looking at the condition of the leader. Isn't that true? It's so easily done. But the shepherd image tells us that that's completely foolish.

Because if you go to the car away show and if they're judging the sheep or the cows or whatever, they don't go around to the car park and check what the cars are like. And they don't go and look at the crofters and check whether they've got fancy shoes or nice clothes or a Rolex watch. They don't even look at that. What do they look at? They look at the flock. And the health of the leader is completely determined by the health of his flock. That's where the judgment lies. And that's an amazing reminder that whatever our position of leadership might be. And going into next year, I'm sure you're all going to have different positions of leadership. Maybe some of you are working towards them.

Maybe some of you are passing those positions of leadership on to others. Whatever it may be, we all have positions of leadership. And the biblical image of the shepherd is showing us what that leadership should look like. There's a key link between shepherding and ruling, between shepherding and leading. Israel's leader in the Old Testament failed spectacularly in that role. Today, it still happens. I keep saying every week that I don't want to be political. And then I start talking about politics. So my apologies about that. But across the board just now, when something goes wrong, everyone else has to resign. When something goes wrong, the cabinet gets reshuffled. When something goes wrong, it's always someone else's fault. Biblically, that's poor leadership. Biblical leadership looks very different.

So there's a key link in the Old Testament between shepherding and leadership. But there's another key link as well, and this is just very brief. The second thing where there's a key link is that there's a key link between shepherding and worship. So shepherding and leadership, shepherding and worship. If you go all the way back to Abel in Genesis chapter 4, we see that his role as a shepherd played a key part in his worship of God. You see that in Genesis 4, Abel was a keeper of the sheep. He took an offering to the Lord, and the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering. Noah and Abraham were exactly the same. They offered livestock as an act of worship to God. Later on in the Old Testament, this became much more established under the sacrificial system set out in Leviticus, where the offering of animals from the flock was a key part of the ceremonial worship of the people of Israel.

That means that in the Old Testament, a key aspect of worship was offering sacrifices, and therefore shepherds had a key role in rearing and providing animals for that purpose.

[21 : 12] The Old Testament makes it absolutely clear that it's the best of the flock that was to be offered for the Lord. Now, the reason why those offerings were necessary and why they had this big elaborate sacrificial system was to show the Israelites that atonement for sin was only possible through death. We must remember that the consequence of sin is death. There's an inevitable, unavoidable connection between sin and death. The only way for sinners to be saved is for the death caused by sin to be transferred to another.

As Leviticus makes so clear, it's the blood that makes atonement by the life, and as Hebrews 9 reminds us, without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin. So without these sacrifices, it was impossible for anyone to approach God, and for these offerings to take place, the shepherds needed to provide the sacrifices. So right through the Old Testament, we've got these two things, a link between shepherding and leadership, a link between shepherding and worship. And so the shepherd is the model for how to lead well. The shepherd is the means through which the sacrifices are provided by which relationship with God was possible. In other words, throughout the Old Testament, God's people needed a shepherd to rule them, and they needed a shepherd to provide a sacrifice. And so we can put that in a wee picture, and you can see that imagery of the shepherd has got two key aspects, leadership and worship. I said it's not clear, but yes, you can see leadership and worship just faintly in the background. In particular, rulers as leaders sacrifices for worship. These were key elements in the Old Testament, but the Old Testament is a story of failure in both of these areas. Failed rulers and a failed sacrificial system. And these two are linked because when the leadership failed, the nation's worship became worthless. You see that in Isaiah chapter one, this connection between the two things. God says, what to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord. I've had enough of burnt offerings of rams and of the fat of well fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats.

And one of the reasons why God was fed up with that was because the nation's leadership have failed. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless and the widows cause does not come to them. The Old Testament shepherds failed. The Old Testament is a story of failure.

So how does God respond to that? He says, I'll do it myself. That takes us back to Ezekiel 34, which is such a cool chapter. God rebukes Israel's shepherds, but it culminates in these words where he says, I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. And I myself will make them lie down and declare to the Lord God, I will seek the lost and I will bring back the state and I will bind up the injured and I will strengthen the weak, the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. And then it goes on to say, I'll set up over them one shepherd, my servant David. And for the people of God, by the end of the Old Testament, there's a massive need for this perfect shepherd king to come. And the amazing truth about Matthew chapter two is that he's here. A ruler has come to shepherd

God's people. And if you read through the rest of Matthew or through any of the gospels, you'll discover that Jesus is the perfect shepherd king. Go back to our list of what a shepherd king looks like. Jesus is the one who gives perfect leadership and guidance to his people. That's why he went around doing what? Teaching. He went around teaching people, showing us what we need to do, explaining to us what is right and wrong, revealing us God's truth to us. It's a great reminder that if you feel a bit confused or lost or bewildered with everything, Jesus says, follow me. Listen to what I have to say. It's a great reminder, like we were saying to the children, that Jesus will be the one who guides us through every step of life, even through the massive snow drifts that block our path. He leads us and guides us through his teaching. He steers us away from danger. He is a leader who is worth following.

[26 : 46] He also provides for us. Jesus, as the shepherd king, provides the nourishment that his people need. Now, he did that physically in his own ministry. The feeding of the 5000 is a great example of that. But that's just an illustration for the spiritual nourishment and feeding that he gives us. In the Old Testament, Jeremiah spoke about God's shepherds feeding us with knowledge and understanding. That's the kind of feeding that Jesus gives us, which is so amazing because if spiritually you are hungry or thirsty, then Jesus is saying, come to me and I will provide for you so that you will never hunger again. Now, so often life leaves us hungry and thirsty. Just with that gap in our lives, think things just not seeming right.

There's something missing. There's just a hole that nothing else can fill. Jesus has come to fill it and Jesus has come to quench your thirst and take away your hunger. Jesus carries the weak and the hurt. Just as the shepherd king goes to the broken and weak people in the world, just as the shepherd goes to the broken and weak in his flock, Jesus goes to the broken and weak people in the world and he heals them. You see that in the Gospel narrative. So many people whose lives are a mess and Jesus goes and he heals them and he helps them. So if you have got bruises from a hard year, if you feel like you're limping into 2022, if you feel like you're still carrying a lot of scars from mistakes that you've made, what does Jesus want you to do? He wants you to come to him so he can just pick you up and carry you. And again, this is such a contrast with leadership today. If you were to massively stuff up at work, maybe you'd be okay, but if you're in a high profile job in the UK today and something that will be on the news, if you stuff up, if you make a mistake, if something goes badly wrong in your life, what's the only thing that's acceptable for you to do? Resign and spend the rest of your life hanging your head in shame, not with Jesus. If you've mucked up, if you're scarred, if you're broken, Jesus wants to pick you up, hold you and carry you every single step for which you need carrying.

You've tenderly restored you from everything that's gone wrong in your life. Jesus gathers the lost and the wandering. So as the shepherd king, Jesus travelled around looking for people who were lost and he brought them back. And whether that was vulnerable prostitutes, corrupt tax collectors, threatening madmen, religious fanatics, confused fishermen, broken families, Jesus sought them all out. And that's what Jesus has done for every single one of us as Christians. He's come and he's gathered us in. And this is a reminder that the real truth about Christianity is always better than we first think because we can often think with Christianity, you know, it's so amazing that I found Jesus. And we can think of that amazing moment when we've come to him in the chaos of life and in all the sorrow that we feel. You've got that amazing joy of hearing the gospel and thinking, I found Jesus. And at one sense, that's true, but the real truth is even better than that because the real truth is that he came to find you. And that's because he loved you before you ever even knew about him. And it's a reminder that your shepherd king has been looking for you since forever.

And if anyone here is not yet a Christian or not sure where they stand and they think that, you know, that Jesus has kind of wondered, you've just gone past you or sort of that Jesus has got fed up of you or that you've blown your chance or whatever or Jesus is no longer thinking about you or you're just, you know, that you've just mucked up too much.

It's just, that's just theological rubbish of the highest order. It's totally untrue.

[31 : 57] Jesus comes to seek the lost, even those who've got lost for the thousandth time. He will never give up. And Jesus protects his flock from danger. There's no doubt that we face so many dangers in life. There's so many things that are threatening us and sin can so easily wreck our lives and the wreck the lives of the people around us. Jesus has come to protect us. He protects us in his teaching, steering us away from paths that are unhelpful.

But above all else, he protects us through what he's done for us on the cross because by the cross he unites us to himself. And by the cross he has shown us that he's brave enough, strong enough and so protective that he'll never, ever, ever let you get snatched away. You think about coming to the end of 2021. You think about going into 2022. If you trust in Jesus, the one thing that you can be absolutely sure of is that he's holding you and he'll never let you go. Jesus is the one who leads us, provides for us, carries us, gathers us and protects us. And this is where we see that Jesus is the perfect leader for us to follow. But what about what we were saying about worship and sacrifices and all that kind of stuff? Well, Jesus fulfills all of that as well. The Old Testament was waiting for a perfect king. Jesus says, I'll do it. The Old Testament was also waiting for a perfect sacrifice. Jesus says, I'll do it. And that's why he could say, I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Remember we said both of these things were failures in the Old Testament. Failed leadership, failed worship, the rulers were a failure, the sacrifices were ultimately a failure. Both of these need to be sorted out. Jesus is the perfect ruler. But he's also the perfect lamb. And all of that is pointing us to the fact that Jesus is everything that we need. Everything. We need a perfect king to shepherd us. We need a perfect lamb to die for us. Jesus does it all. And I just want to show you a couple of verses, one from Hebrews and one from Revelation that bring all this together.

May the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant. He shepherds us by his blood and it culminates in Revelation where you have this incredible image that the lamb in the midst of their throne will be their shepherd. He'll guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. It's an amazing reminder that you think about the whole of the Old Testament. Everything that was needed is fulfilled in Jesus. You think about the whole of 2021 that's passed. You think about the whole of your life up to this point. You think about the whole of life and eternity that's ahead of us. Jesus is everything that we need. He's come to do it all. I want to conclude by asking you what kind of animal do you think that you are? So this is maybe a weird thing to say but supposing you are going to get a tattoo of the animal that represented you, what would you go for? Maybe you think of what people tend to get like an eagle, free, capable, a lion, brave, strong, like a race horse, a stallion, focused and capable. You sometimes see your footballers have got these tattoos or whatever. If you want it, it's not going to be a tattoo. It could just be an animal. You think what animal are you like and it's always the big brave, strong super animals that people tend to think of. But if I look at myself, I'm not particularly strong and fearless like a lion. I'm not particularly free and capable like an eagle. I'm not particularly focused and determined like a race horse. When I look at myself, I see somebody who gets lost quite often, who makes the same mistakes and is repeatedly stupid in their life. I realise that I am much more like a sheep than I am like anything else. As a sheep, I really, really need a shepherd. What about you? Amen. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the good shepherd. We thank you that you laid down your life for us. We thank you that you are everything that we need. As we come to the end of this year and as we go into a new year, we pray that every single one of us would follow you. Amen.