

Wandering And Pursuing

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[0 : 0 0] we are going to turn back to Ezekiel chapter 34. Let me read again at verse 11. For thus says the Lord God, behold, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.

Ezekiel 34, I don't know if that's a chapter that you've read much before or if it's familiar to you, but it is a fascinating chapter and it's an incredibly important one. I would say that this chapter is probably one of the most important statements about leadership that has ever been written and that's really in many ways one of the things we associate most with this chapter, the whole question of leadership. The chapter uses the imagery of sheep and a shepherd to give a very, very sharp rebuke to the leaders of Israel because they had neglected and abused the people, their flock and instead of caring for those under their authority, the leaders had left the people hurt and scattered and that position of authority of leadership to teach us today.

That's why this is such an important chapter because it's got so many lessons to teach us today, especially when we see power being used in the wrong way, when power is used to protect the powerful rather than caring for the people and that applies in families, it applies in the workplace, it applies globally in terms of politics as well and that poor leadership that's highlighted in this chapter contrasts so magnificently with the care and provision that God makes for his people and this is all pointing us to the fact that he is the ultimate shepherd and that of course the imagery here just like Psalm 23, the imagery, the shepherd here is all pointing forward to its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He more than anyone else is the good shepherd, he's the one who came to lay down his life for his sheep. So anybody here who's in a positional leadership at home, at work, in the community Ezekiel 34 is a chapter that's well worth reading and well worth thinking about but that's not else that this chapter and that whole topic of leadership because

I want to look at something else that this chapter touches on and it's a wider issue that runs right through the whole of the Bible and it's an issue that affects every single one of us, especially in terms of our faith. This chapter speaks to us about the whole issue of wondering and pursuing and I want us to think about this topic today and we're going to use two very simple headings, getting this wrong and getting this right. So first of all thinking about how we get this wrong and this whole issue of wondering and pursuing is one that humanity has frequently got wrong. In fact, our thinking about this is often the exact opposite of the truth and the mistake that people make is this, people think that God is wondering and we need to pursue him.

God is wondering and we need to pursue him and if you think about it, you see that all around you, all around us people are pursuing a wondering God and sometimes that might be the God of the Bible, it might be that people are seeking the God that they know about from the Bible and that's who they want to pursue but they approach him as though he's wondering, as though he's hard to find and out of reach. So lots of people will then think, well, I do want to meet with God but I need to encounter him through some kind of mystical experience or some kind of spectacular event, maybe a vision or an unexpected turn of events or even through some kind of punishment or some kind of really hard situation that you have to go through and if people get these things they think, oh, I found God at last.

[4 : 0 7] He was wondering, he was elusive, he was hidden but I pursued him and I found him and that kind of thinking is very common, it's also inaccurate and it's actually very, very unhelpful because one of the consequences of that kind of thinking is that it immediately reduces the importance of the Bible because people think that, you know, this experience or this thing is the thing that matters and you end up in this really odd situation where people are thinking, I want to find the God of the Bible but I'm not actually going to find him in the Bible, I'll find him in some other experience or circumstance and that leads on to the additional danger where what you have is people, they've maybe had this experience and they just hold on to that experience in the past as

though that's the key and the foundation of their faith and so, you know, people will have amazing experiences and I'm not saying that that's wrong, sometimes people do experience amazing things but we cannot make that the foundation that we base everything on because if we do, we are clinging to an experience instead of clinging to Jesus and it's so important to remember that the impact of a stunning experience will always fade and so whatever that might be, whatever experience it might be, you can probably think of amazing things that happen, I don't mean necessarily in terms of faith but amazing things that have happened in your life, you can remember them and they are special and precious but the impact fades over time, the impact of a stunning experience will always fade, the impact of a healthy relationship will always grow. So a wedding day is a stunning experience but for some of us it's quite a long time ago now and you can't remember all of it but so that means that the experience of that moment does fade over time but if the marriage is a healthy marriage then the impact of that relationship is going to grow week on week, month on month, year on year and so we want it always to be the case that we're not holding on to a specific experience, instead we're looking to Jesus and the other issue that this whole kind of big experience mindset can cause is that it creates two categories of believers, you've got the ordinary ones who don't really have things like that and they're kind of you know cold and stale and failing and then you've got the real ones who are hungry and thirsty and on fire and you can often see that kind of categorization emerging, it tends to produce two things, it produces a lot of discouragement in one group and a lot of arrogance in the other. So sometimes people pursue the God of the Bible but they presume as though he's wandering and we've got to find him, other times people will pursue a wandering God that's not the God of the Bible and we see that everywhere, people who know that there's more to life than just physical matter and mechanical processes and so they're looking for something divine, sometimes people will pursue that through nature so they will look at the universe and see that as a God, that the name for that's pantheism, other people will sometimes embrace a faith system that is grounded on our efforts, our duties, our conformity in order to encounter the divine, that's just legalism and it's the default posture of all man-made religion, whichever God is being pursued, sometimes people will pursue a God that's unreachable so there's just this kind of mysterious other that's out there somewhere and you can't really know him, it, whatever, you can't define this God but it must

be pursued and there are many people looking for that something that's out there and sometimes people will pursue a wandering God that's not a God at all, it's actually, it's something that they would never call a God but it's something that's become their idol and that can happen in loads of ways, it can be our money, it can be the achievements in our career, it can be finding the perfect husband or wife, raising the perfect children, impressing our friends or our colleagues, tasting victory in our favorite sport, being the best at our favorite hobby, it can happen in hundreds of ways because our hearts are so prone towards creating idols and when we make an idol we will start pursuing it but all of these idols wonder and that's why they're always moving on from us and always and for me the great example of this is sport, whether that's football or Wimbledon or the Olympics that are coming up, you just want your team or your country to win again even if they won last year, we've moved on and we need that taste of victory again, no and it happens in so many other parts of life as well, in all of these ways we keep thinking that God is wandering and we have to pursue him and the key thing I want to highlight is that that's not true, it is absolutely not true because God is not a wanderer, God is not wandering, he's not drifting around, he's not floating in different kind of realms or experiences, he's not this kind of mystical ghost that flutters in and flutters away, God is not a wanderer so he's never doing that and our theology confirms that very, very clearly, often if you read theology books you will sometimes come across a discussion of the attributes of God, now whoops I forgot to write off, do you know that I always do that, I say the word in my head but I don't write it on the paper, attributes of God and these are basically the great characteristics and features that God possesses, I want to give you a few examples, God is immutable, that basically means that he does not change so there's a profound and beautiful simplicity about God, he is who he is, he never changes, he's utterly stable, he's utterly consistent, another attribute of God is that he's omnipresent which is just a fancy way of saying present everywhere, so that means that he is everywhere, it doesn't mean that he is everything so we're not saying that everything is God, we're not saying that the universe is divine, there's always a distinction between the creator and the creation but omnipresence simply means that you cannot go anywhere where God isn't present, he sees everything, hears everything, knows

everything and that's why we sang a Psalm 139 because it captures it so well, God is also omnipotent that means all powerful omnipotent, there we go, a key aspect of that is the doctrine of providence, the fact that he upholds, directs, governs the entire creation by his powers, in other words nothing happens without God being aware and involved and engaged and we also say that God is both imminent, I need to get my number of M's right here, imminent and transcendent, there's another pair of massive words, I need to make sure I spell this right, imminent and transcendent, what does that mean? Well it basically means that God is beyond us and near us, so he's transcendent, that means that he is above and over all things, he is bigger than what we can fully understand, his rule extends beyond all the boundaries of our experience, so he exists beyond the limits of space and time and matter and energy, he is beyond all that, he is the absolute of all reality, he is transcendent but at the same time he is imminent, that means he is near to us, he is with us, he's accessible to us, he's concerned about us, so these are some of the magnificent attributes of God, immutable omnipresent, omnipotent, imminent and transcendent, all of these attributes are incompatible with wandering. A wandering God who is sometimes here, sometimes there, is not immutable and is not omnipresent and he's not omnipotent and there can only ever be a trade-off between transcendence and imminence, if God wonders it means that there's a space bigger than God where he does the wandering, that's impossible, nothing is bigger than God, so it's an absolute theological fact that God does not wonder, instead God is there and that's a phrase we should always remember, God is the God who is there, there's actually a very famous book with that title written by Francis Schaefer, the God who is there, very, very good book and well worth reading, the key point is this, that's the key point, God is not wandering, God is there, in other words everywhere you look you will find him and so you look at the vastness of the universe, his glory is declared, you take the petal of a flower and put it under a microscope, you see his astounding craftsmanship, you look at a sunset or a snowflake or the northern lights or a turquoise beach in the hebrides, you see the beauty of his creation, you look at all the advancements and achievements of humanity, you see the image of God bearers at work in his creation, you look at family and friends and joy and laughter and you see that there's so much in life that is genuinely good but that goodness can only be genuine if it comes from the God who's fundamentally good and who brings meaning and beauty to life, you even look at the failures and mistakes of humanity and you see the reality of justice and truth that can only find its source in God, you look at your own conscience and you see the moral awareness of the humanity that's created by the morally impeccable God and if you look into your own heart you don't find your destiny or your true self or your real identity, what you find is the whole that only God can fill and all of that is telling you that God is not wondering, he's there, he's here, he's always been here, he's not moving or changing or drifting, he is always right there, so that means that if you are thinking that God is wondering and you need to pursue him, it means that you're getting it completely wrong, so how do we get this right?

[16:12] Well we have to realize that God is not wondering and we are not pursuing him, the truth is we are wondering and he is pursuing us.

That's the magnificent truth delivered by Ezekiel in this chapter, the leaders of Israel have failed miserably his shepherds and God responds by saying I'll do it, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. Now this is both the hard truth and the astonishing beauty of the gospel, the hard truth is realizing that we are the wanderers, we're the ones who drift, we're the ones who are unstable, we're the ones who get lost and disorientated, so God has made us for himself, he's blessed us with so many privileges, he's honored us with profound responsibilities and we respond by wandering off after all sorts of nonsense, so we're sucked in by the latest fashions, by the hottest gossip, by the latest thing on TV or social media, we're tempted by greed and drunkenness and pornography and the unending urge to impress other people, we're captivated by celebrities, by ideologies, by political movements, by the newest idea or even by the distinctives of our own heritage and history that we can't ever let go of, we're motivated by our anxiety over what other people think and at the same time we're motivated by confrontation towards those who think differently from us, we're blown off course by the busyness of life, by the pressures of school and work, the attractions of wealth, the temptations to feel sorry for ourselves in all these ways and in a hundred more we are the ones who are wandering and that's been the story of humanity ever since the fall, Cain murdered his brother Abel and became a wanderer in the earth, the Israelites came out of Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness even more so they wandered in their hearts as they

turned away from the Lord and individuals like Samson, David, Solomon, they all did great things for God but they also drifted from him and they wandered after all that the world offers and we do the same and we can prove it because how often do we hear people say phrases like I'm not in a good place, I've lost my bearings, I've drifted, I don't know which way to turn, these phrases are all the cries of the wanderer and the big irony is that when we think that we're pursuing God we're actually wandering away from him again and that's a hard truth because feeling lost is horrible, admitting you're lost is painful, I experience that every time I go to Tesco's because I don't know where anything is and I hate wandering around Tesco when I can't find anything, I also hate asking for help and so I keep wandering and I don't want to ask someone where something is and it takes me a long long time to swallow my pride enough to ask someone where I find the jam or whatever it is I've been sent for and so you've got this feeling where you feel lost, it's horrible but it's painful to admit it and that's exactly where we are spiritually, we feel lost and it's horrible, we're unsure about our purpose in life, we're unsure why the things that have happened to us have happened, we're not sure what we believe, we think do I have faith, do I doubt, we're frustrated about what we are, we have regret about the mistakes we've made, we're anxious about what lies ahead in life and we're terrified about what'll happen when we die and feeling lost like that is horrible, admitting it is painful because it's so much nicer to be the person who knows where they are and to be the person who can tell other people where to go

when someone asks me where to find the jam in Tesco's, oh that's a great feeling, not that anyone does that but when you get to be the one who knows the way that's a great feeling, it's hard to admit you're lost and yet the truth is we're all prone to wonder, we all get sucked down the wrong paths, that can happen in tiny ways so we can go a day where we forget to think about God, forget to pray, forget to read even a verse of the Bible, it can happen in little things day to day, it can happen in big ways where we might spend weeks, months, years and we're drifting away from God, we're wondering and it can sometimes take us a long long time to realize that we've lost our way and so that is a hard truth in the gospel but alongside that hard truth is the astonishing beauty of the gospel whereby even though we wander so much God is not leaving us to drift aimlessly instead, he is pursuing us and that's the pattern you see in scripture, the Israelites repeatedly wandered from God, he pursued them, he led them out of Egypt, he met them at Mount

Sinai, he dwelt with them in the Tabernacle, that's true of individual God pursued him, David he wandered from God by committing adultery, God pursued him and brought him to repentance and here in Ezekiel, we're near the end of the Old Testament in terms of chronology, the people of God are in exile in Babylon having lost their nation and so they literally are, they've wandered off to another nation where they've been taken captive but the very fact that there's a prophet speaking to them, the fact that Ezekiel is there communicating the word of God tells them that God is pursuing the people who have wandered away from him and the greatest example of God pursuing us is the culmination of everything that the Old Testament was pointed to, it's the coming of Jesus, the incarnation, he came to be one of us, he came alongside us, he came to taste death for us and you see that captured so magnificently in the most famous version of the whole Bible in John 3.16 where it doesn't say God so loved the world that the people who can find him will have eternal life, it says no God so loved the world that he gave, the greatest demonstration of God's and that word gave is the greatest demonstration of God's pursuit of lost sinners like us, God takes the initiative, God takes the cost and he reaches us no matter how far we've wandered and Jesus himself taught about this, we don't have time to go into it but there in Luke 15, 4 to 18, you've got the great parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, these are familiar parables, you can read through that passage later if you want, Luke 15, great passage to remember, it's reminding us that God pursues those who've wandered and all of heaven rejoices when he finds them and that is so so important for us to think about because it's telling us that reaching God, reaching God and for any of you here, for everybody here if you're thinking about whether you've wandered in your faith or whether you're not sure if you've come to faith, this is the crucial thing you've got to remember, reaching God is never a case of discovering what's around the next corner, it's never a case of reaching a greater height, it's never a case of unraveling this impenetrable spiritual mystery that only a few people can figure out, reaching God is not about getting to that next target, whatever it may be, reaching God is none of that because reaching

God is simply a case of turning around, turning around and that's the, that's what repentance means, turning around and that's the only step we have to take, we said a moment ago, God is always there, he's always there, you can't wander away from him, you can't get too far from him,

you can't get past where he is and that means that no matter how far you wander, no matter how lost you feel, no matter how many times you've stuffed up, no matter how many mistakes you feel no matter how many mistakes you feel you've made, he's there, he is right there and his thereness is inescapable and that means you don't need to find him, you just need to turn to him, you just need to turn to him and the great verse in the Bible that captures that is Isaiah 55:6 it says seek the Lord while he may be found, you might say well Thomas that's contradicting yourself, you're saying seek the Lord while he may be found, well yes, the whole reason you can seek him is because he's near, say seek the Lord because he's miles away, seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he's near, it's not saying seek the Lord because he's miles away, it's saying turn to him because he's right there. If salvation was about us finding a wandering God, that would mean that actually we're the hero because it makes you into this kind of religious Indiana Jones who's kind of fountain what everybody's looking for, you've won the race, you've got the secret and you can then just admire your apparent success, that is not the Gospel, that is not the Gospel because the Gospel is about God pursuing a wandering people, it's about the God who will never forget his people, the God who'll never give up on you and the God who has given everything that is needed for him to bring his people home. We will spend all of eternity and when we realize that we discover that he's the hero and that's why we will spend all of eternity marveling and rejoicing over everything that he has done. So when it comes to wandering and pursuing, it's so easy to get it wrong, it's so easy to think that God is wandering, we need to pursue him, the truth is the exact opposite, we are wandering and he is pursuing us. I want to close with two points of application. Number one, all of this needs to shape our posture as a church. So this month is our mission focus month, we're getting input at our evening services and our midweek meeting from mission partners throughout the world and it's fantastic to do that and Thursday night was amazing hearing about what God is doing in Ukraine and Moldova and other parts of the world and it's so so good to hear about what God is doing across the world in mission but we are also being reminded in our mission focus month that we are in a mission field here and there are so many people around us who are wondering who need to be brought back to the Lord and this means that what we're saying here has to shape the way we treat people as a church and this is really important for us to remember this must shape the way we treat people. I can illustrate this with two examples from my pets okay so my dog is Rosie, we take Rosie to the pizza every year, we've been at the pizza, the pizza cut just a moment of smugness there, the pizza cut. Rosie comes to the pizza, she loves [28 : 27] the pizza, every single time we go to the pizza we are finished, we get ready to go and there's no sign of Rosie and she disappears and she's off, I don't know, exploring, chasing, smelling, whatever and we have to call her and call her and call her and call her and I'm sure you've probably been in car thinking who's that shouting Rosie out in the mirror because it's me shouting my dog who won't come and you have to be patient and you have to persevere and you have to keep trying and sometimes you get a bit frustrated but that is exactly what we have to do as a church, keep calling, keep inviting, keep welcoming and when Rosie finally comes even though I've been waiting ages and I'm like I have to give her a warm welcome because because if I give her a row it's going to just teach her to just stay away when I'm calling her, I have to welcome her warmly and actually show that I'm actually delighted that she's back because I am delighted that she's back and again that's just such an important simple lesson for us as people come as we welcome them we've got to show them that we're just delighted that we're here, that they're here, we need to welcome people so so warmly as we keep on calling them to come. The other example is from my new pet, my new hens, so some of you may know that a couple of weeks ago in the evening service the children put out a vote as to what we should name the new hens, three new hens there was a selection of names and you all voted thanks to you my new hens are called Dora which I think is supposed to be Dora the egg explorer, Nugget which chicken the nugget is a bit unfair I actually have forgotten the name the third one can anyone can remember was it Mildred that's the one Mildred is the third one so there we go thank you Dora Mildred Nugget well the other day Nugget escaped and went into the gleebe was stuck on the wrong side of the fence and couldn't get back to the to the shed Nugget was nervous and scared what did I need to do I couldn't go Nugget come I couldn't do that Nugget was running around terrified what did I need to do I needed to be really gentle when it comes to faith a lot of people are nervous and scared especially those who feel like they've wandered God is pursuing them he's going to bring them home and when he does we need to be so gentle and kind and tender towards them all of this needs to shape the way we are as a church but it also speaks to us as individuals and I close with it with this the idea that God is

wandering and we pursue him actually makes faith a competition and it's just a kind of twisted version of survival of the fittest it leaves us thinking are you worthy enough to pursue God are you good enough have you got what it takes all of that is absolute nonsense God is not interested in you proving yourself and finding him he's not interested in you showing him that you're worthy enough because the truth is God is pursuing you and he's doing that because you're already worth it you are already worth it because he already loves you and he's brought you here today because you are too precious to lose and he's calling you to come home to him amen let's pray

Father thank you so much for the truth of the gospel