

**Text:** Ezekiel 34:15-16, 1:1-3:3

**Theme: Shepherding the Flock: (iv) How the Weak Sheep are to be Strengthened.**

- 5 In this the fourth in our series on how the LORD will Shepherd His flock, we will look at how the Weak Sheep are to be Strengthened.

10 The weak and feeble sheep are those who, although they remain in the church and do not fall into any of the grosser vices, and do not commit any notorious sin, are weak in faith and love and all the strengths of the Christian life.

This includes those who are fainthearted in the face of bodily attacks; those who are slow and lethargic when it comes to helping their neighbours; those who are careless of discipline; those who err in right understanding.

15 It also includes those who are afflicted by the disorderly stirrings of evil desires and lusts, giving in to anger, envy, jealousy, and addiction to fleshly lusts, with the result that they become diseased and weak in their Christian lives.

20 Now most all of us would be able to confirm that if, by the Grace of God alone, we are not there in that place today, we've been there at some stage; and God forbid, we might come to such a place again in future.

It is no shame to be a Weak sheep as it were.

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It however becomes problematic if we wish to remain a Weak sheep.

It should be our heart's desire and life's work to not remain a Weak sheep but to be strengthened,

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We are to search out the Shepherd and receive what He has in store for us so that we might grow strong by Him.

It is with that in mind that I chose this morning's text where we find an example of the Great Shepherd strengthening a Weak sheep.

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My prayer is that from this example we might glean what it looks like when the Great Shepherd strengthens the Weak Sheep. And following on from that, that we might also be strengthened and encouraged.

We will read Ezekiel 1:1-3:3

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But before we read, I want you to not miss the forest by focussing on one particular tree.

Chapter 1 contains an inexplicably wonderful vision of the Glory of the LORD God Almighty – yet our focus will not fall on that today.

45 We will be focussing on chapter 2-3:3, yet we need to read chapter 1 to have the right perspective on chapter 2 and following.

Let us then read **Ezekiel 1:1-3:3**

50 We find Ezekiel in Babylon with the exiles. He is not having a good time of it.

He remembers where he was – he was at the Chebar canal as an exile in Babylon.

55 He even remembers the day and the month and it was his thirtieth year.

The thirtieth year was an important year in his life because it would have been the year in which he was ordained to the priesthood to serve in the temple in Jerusalem in Israel.

We'll come back to that detail in just a short moment.

60 All those details were firmly imprinted upon his conscience and upon his mind.

He remembers very clearly who he was before and who he was afterwards was clearly quite different in the way his life was changed and its direction.

65 Let us consider for a moment “Who is Ezekiel?”

Chapter 1, verse 3, tells us he is the son of Buzi. We are also given the detail that he is a priest. We have already mentioned, or alluded to the fact that he was a priest in training.

70 He would have been ordained when he reached the age of thirty, but he had not reached that point yet because everything was about to abruptly change and end in 597 BC.

He would have been twenty-six years old at the time.

75 And in that year, he and his wife, together with countless other thousands from the southern kingdom would have been taken off into exile.

They were part of the second deportation to Babylon.

The first one was in 605, the second was in 597, and the third and final one would have been in 586 BC.

80 And really from Ezekiel’s perspective, his whole life had been overturned.

Everything seemed completely wrong.  
Everything he had been preparing for had come to naught.

85 He certainly couldn't serve as a priest in Babylon,  
could he?

There was no temple.

There was no opportunity to receive sacrifices if there's no temple.

90 He couldn't listen to people who were afflicted by their own consciences because the exiles he was with, they were a hard-hearted people.

There was no repentance.

95 But here he is in the land of Chaldea and it is here that the LORD chooses to meet with him in a vision.

He's calling him to service and He's calling him to service not as a priest, but as a prophet. And that's a significant change. It's a change in direction as God calls him to set forth His glory.

100 One commentator wrote this. He said, "Priests comfort the afflicted while prophets afflict the comfortable."

Priests comfort the afflicted while prophets afflict the comfortable.

105 His training was to listen to the broken-hearted, those who were repentant, to take their sacrifices and offer it to the LORD because it's through the shedding of blood that there's the forgiveness of sins.

But here he is in exile, at the Chebar River.

These people were not repenting.

110 They didn't need comfort.

They needed someone who was going to afflict them with the truth so that they would be uncomfortable and they would be ripped out of their ease.

115 So he sees this vision of the glory of the LORD which we read.

He uses words that he's really struggling to describe what he is seeing.

He uses phrases, "it's like" or "in the appearance of."

120 In other words, human language fails to truly describe that which he has been exposed to or that which he has seen.

The crux of his vision is that on the sapphire throne is One who is seated in the likeness of human appearance.

This is the same One, in human appearance, that Isaiah saw in Isaiah 6.

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We know this one to be the LORD Jesus Christ.

Having glimpsed the majesty and the glory of the LORD – look at verse 28 again, the text that we read – Ezekiel is on his face.

He is absolutely undone and he is shattered as he lays before the LORD.

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There's an old African proverb that says, "If you are filled with pride then you will have no room for wisdom."

It seems that is what God is doing here.

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He's laying Ezekiel low, very low, and it's from that posture that God changes Ezekiel's focus from himself and from his priestly training and perhaps even bemoaning the fact that he finds himself in the condition that he finds himself, and He refocuses Ezekiel on the LORD of glory.

And that changes everything!

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From our text this morning, I want us to see how God strengthens Ezekiel through three ways.

145 God strengthens Ezekiel by empowering him, verses 1 and 2;  
God strengthens Ezekiel through sending him, verses 3 through  
7;  
and God strengthens Ezekiel through equipping him, from verse  
8 onwards.

It is my prayer you will see that as this is the way that God  
strengthens Ezekiel,  
150 this is also the way that God promises to strengthen us  
in the service of the kingdom.

## **The LORD Empowers Us**

So firstly, it is the LORD who empowers us, verses 1 and 2.

155 Now in this empowerment, there are two parts. Firstly, He humbles us.  
Secondly, He fills us.

Now we have already spoken a little bit about how Ezekiel was  
humbled through this glorious vision; and it was indeed a glorious  
vision.

160 Did you however notice that it was the LORD who revealed  
Himself to the prophet. That's a significant detail.

It was the LORD who came to Ezekiel.



Ezekiel was not looking for Him.

165 He was not walking amongst the exiles looking for this veil that could be torn apart so that he could get a glimpse of the glory of God. That wasn't on his radar.

It was God who condescended and came to him.

It was God who chose Ezekiel for this particular task that He was putting before him.

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Do you remember that moment when God came to you? That moment when He came to you and He humbled you, He laid you low. That day that He called you to Himself.

175 Perhaps it was a day when you were reading Scripture and you were made newly mindful of His majesty and His glory and your heart was strangely warmed once again.

Do you remember when you heard the Gospel proclaimed for the first time?

180 Perhaps it was for the tenth time and once again there was a strange warmth that you realized once again that you are a sinner deserving God's righteous judgment, that God loves you and He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to live and die and that Jesus Christ willingly came to live and then to lay down His life, and in laying down His life He took your sin, my sin, upon His own

185 shoulders and He paid the penalty that I should have been  
deserving of?

The good news in all of that is: I then hear that as I repent and as  
I believe, I find life.

190 Do you remember that? Don't ever forget it, because you  
may have heard it that day and there were people that were  
around you and it made no difference in their life because  
they did not hear it.

But to you, it changed everything.

195 It brought you from darkness to light, it brought a  
warmth and a meaning to life, and it set you on a  
different path.

You were given a glimpse of the glory of God by faith that day,  
and one day – and it's the day we're all longing for – one day,  
that faith will become sight and we will see Him as He is in all His  
200 beauty, in all His splendor, all His majesty – the Lion of Judah  
and the Lamb that was slain, seated upon the throne.

Would you like to guess what we're going to do then?

Pretty much what Ezekiel did – we're going to bow  
down in adoration and worship and praise.

205 Now notice from the text, having been laid low, he also needed to be raised up.

There was a place to bow down, but He was being sent on a task and He needed to be raised up.

Look at Chapter 2 verse 1 with me please. Notice that there is a voice  
210 of one speaking, and He says to Ezekiel, “*Son of man.*”

That phrase, “son of man,” is the name that is used for Ezekiel by God ninety-three times in this book.

God never refers to Ezekiel as “Ezekiel;” it is always “son of man.”

215 It serves as a reminder of his humanity.

“*Son of man, stand on your feet and I will speak with you.*”

You can imagine at that point Ezekiel thinking to himself, “Are you kidding me? How does a mortal stand before Your infinite majesty?”

220 But we are reminded there is a pretty well-known statement that says, “God’s commandments are God’s enablements.”

Look at the text again. As the LORD gives this command, notice “*It is the Spirit who entered into me and set me on my feet.*”

You see, what God commands, He also enables by His Spirit.

225 Beloved, this is our only hope, our only hope if we are going to stand before God – to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ, to be filled by the Spirit to be able to stand before His majesty.

Now sin condemns us. Before God, we are undone.

230 But God, out of His grace, He gives you His Spirit, He gives you His Son, so that you may stand and you may go and you may go with the purpose to go and serve the kingdom at large.

God’s chosen means is to speak via the Word, it is to give understanding by the Spirit, and it is to open our ears that we may hear.

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Look at verse 2 again. “*The Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet.*” now notice what he says then – “*And I heard Him speaking to me.*”

It is God who opens our ears as we go.

240 Dear Christian, let me ask you, have you heard the Word of God to you and have you responded?

**The LORD Commands and Sends Us**

Do notice that Ezekiel has not been set on his feet for no reason. And  
245 so the LORD now commands and the LORD sends him. We see this in  
verses 3 through 7.

After Ezekiel is set upon his feet, notice how the LORD doesn't ask  
Ezekiel if he would like to go. No, that's not what happens in the text.

250 Verse 3, "*Son of man, I send you.*" That is a command.

"I've given you a glimpse of My glory, now you are to go."

Hopefully you see the grace of God as you read and reread verses 3  
through 7, because here we see how God sends Ezekiel strengthened  
in the knowledge of who he is being sent to and what God's  
255 expectations are of him.

There is strength in being equipped in what your expectations  
are, and of course the people you are going to.

To be forewarned is to be...forearmed.

That's partly what God is doing here.

260 He is equipping and He is strengthening Ezekiel with this  
knowledge of who they are and what God expects.

Therefore the LORD reminds him, "This is who you are being  
sent to, Ezekiel."

265 Now remember, he is going to be speaking to people, both those who are in exile but predominantly it is going to be those who are still back home in Jerusalem in Israel.

The year of this vision is 593 and the final deportation will be 586.

270 It's a seven year period where he is being called to prophesy so that they will be without excuse.

Therefore the LORD is telling Ezekiel,

275 "You are going to these people. They are your people. And I'm sending you with the message of judgment and repentance and belief. And as a prophet, you will afflict their comfort. They will not enjoy it."

Verse 3, "I'm sending you to the people of Israel. Ezekiel, you know them. They are your people. You know how they think. You know their rebellious hearts."

280 And then God says to a nation of rebels – "who have rebelled against Me." And really that phrase there in the Hebrew is a reminder that God is reminding Ezekiel that they have broken the terms of the covenant that was established between God and His people back in

285 Deuteronomy 28 and 30.

They had broken those covenant mandates and as a result, He was having to deal with His people.

God also reminds Ezekiel of their heart condition.

This is something that Ezekiel could not have known by himself.

290 Notice in verse 4 he says that they are “*impudent and stubborn.*”

That’s a detail with regards to the heart of what the people are like. They are hard-faced, and not even the threat of judgment is going to soften their hearts, but at least they will know that there has been a prophet in their midst.

295 The LORD then says to him, “When you go, here’s My expectations for you.”

Verse 4, “You shall say to them, ‘*Thus says the LORD God.*’

300 You are not to speak your words, Ezekiel. I don’t want you to tickle their ears. I don’t want you to water down what I’m telling you to tell them. You are to speak My words.”

Verse 5, “*Whether they hear or refuse to hear.*” in the Hebrew, the inference there is – “They are not going to change; they are not going to truly hear, but you need to go.

305 And as a result of not truly hearing, they are also going to push back on My words. There’s going to be a backlash.”

Verse 6, “Be prepared, because I don’t want you to *be afraid of them, nor their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions.*

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Whether you face mental, emotional, verbal, or even physical suffering, whether it be directly or indirectly from them, I am sending you to them and all I expect from you, Ezekiel, you are to be faithful, you are to be obedient, and you are to be dependent upon Me as you go.

Faithfulness, obedience and dependence upon Me.”

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Now brothers and sisters, as we bring this a little bit closer to home, we should not be too surprised that we too, by the grace of God being in the Gallatin Valley, have been set amongst a rebellious, stiff-necked, and hard-hearted people.

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The description of Israel is very much like those who have not yet come to a saving knowledge.

We have been set amongst our own people.

We know them.

We know how they think.

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We know how they respond.

And God is calling us to go to them.



I think that is why passages such as this one are such a great encouragement.

330 Not much has changed in the disposition of humanity, but at the same time, not much has changed in the way that God strengthens His people to go to those who have not yet heard the good news.

All that the LORD God expects from us – and this ought to be a relief –

we are called to be faithful,  
335 we are called to be obedient,  
and we are called to lean upon the Savior,

to press in more and more as we depend upon Him to work through us and to bring forth the fruit in His good timing.

### 340 **The LORD Equips Us**

Now Ezekiel may have wondered at this point, “Well, how am I supposed to go about doing this?” Some of you might be thinking that as well.

345 Let us see from the text, because I pray that you might see from verses 8 onwards how the LORD equips Ezekiel and also equips us for the road.

John Calvin wrote: “Whoever shall acknowledge that God is sufficient for overcoming all obstacles will gird himself bravely for his work, but many are so full, so puffed out with confidence that they bring forth  
350 nothing but wind. Hence, let us learn to seek from God alone. Let us learn to seek from God alone.”

Calvin’s words are actually quite helpful in helping us to understand how God further equipped Ezekiel and of course by inference us as well.

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The LORD does it through a warning and an encouragement.

Look at the text, verse 8:

the warning is this – “*Be not rebellious like that rebellious house.*”

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And then the encouragement is – “*and eat what I give you.*” Eat the scroll that I give to you.

This is the equipping for the road.

Now what happens when we eat something?

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Ever heard the saying “you are what you eat” or “you become what you eat”?

Try eating a Huckleberry pie every day for one full month.

You'll find that the Huckleberry pie may shape you in a way that you did not intend.

370 But as you listen to this warning and this encouragement, it's very helpful and it sets us on the right track.

The warning is this – as the LORD sends us out amongst a people who are antagonistic and even at points they are indifferent to the good  
375 news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and there are many people even in our own Valley who just do not care about who Jesus is and what that means for their lives.

One of the great benefits of our day and age is that you don't need to wonder where people are at in their Christian walk  
380 because most of them are pretty open.

They're agnostic.

They really just don't care about the good news.

They don't have a place for Jesus in their lives.

Now in many respects that is a challenge, but also, at least you  
385 know the starting point and you are looking for inroads all the time to present good news.

When we live in a culture like this, the warning is this to us – that we must take care not to assimilate and become like the very people that we are trying to reach.

390 We are not called to be culturally relevant to the point where the Gospel is lost and we become like the world.

God has set us apart. And that means we must not water down the message either.

395 Notice in verse 10 that it may be a message of lamentation and warning and woe, and it will be that to the rebellious heart, but did you notice what happened in chapter 3 verse 3?

That that message of lamentation and warning and woe is actually sweet as honey in the mouth of the child of God.

400 It will be sweet as honey in the mouth of the person who is being brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ,

405 hence we must be faithful and obedient and lean upon Christ to do the work that He has promised to do through His Word.

That's the warning.

Here is the encouragement that He sends us with as we go out.

410 As we pour ourselves out in evangelization and in ministry and in various other acts of service for the kingdom, we must make sure that we keep returning to the very source that is life-giving – the Word itself.

We must keep coming back to it.

It is the Word that shapes our thoughts.

It is the Word that orders our own words.

415 It is the Word that instructs our actions.

We are called to consume it, to inwardly digest it, to fill our spiritual stomachs with it so that we are fully satisfied by the one that the written Word speaks of, and that is the incarnate Word, the LORD Jesus Christ.

420 Once more we get a glimpse of His glory and it sets us on our feet so that we may go about once again.

There should never be a time where we do not come back to the Word to consume it, to get another glimpse of a facet of the LORD Jesus Christ, that causes us to sit back and wonder at who He is and what He has done for us.

425 It is to discover more of the treasures of the One who is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, who upholds the universe by the Word of His power.

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*“And having made purification for our sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High, having become as much superior to the angels as the name He has inherited is more excellent than theirs.” (Hebrews 1:3-4)*

Let us in closing apply these truths some more.

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My prayer, brothers and sisters, is that the LORD would strengthen us, both corporately as a church, but also individually as we grow in our knowledge of the LORD and as we are shaped into the likeness of Christ.

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I pray that He would strengthen us to service, that we would be outward facing.

Now some of you might be thinking possibly like Ezekiel was – How do I go about doing this?

We are for now but a few and our service tends to take the shape of individual service.

445

Yet we need to start having a definitive impact on our surroundings and we will soon need to have the conversations to get that going.

The same goes for evangelism. We might want to consider evangelism training at specific times.

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Get some material from guys who have been doing this for years so that they can give us some of the tools they've learned.

At the end of the day, it is the LORD that moves us and He sends us out and He equips us.

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May the LORD be pleased to strengthen us, to strengthen our resolve to serve Him

as we visit the sick and the widows and the elderly,  
as we seek to be at work in evangelism and through Bible studies,

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or multitudes of other ministries that He has in store for us, many ministries which need to still start.

But may He also deepen our desire for the Word, that we might behold our glorious Savior which causes us, LORD's Day after LORD's Day, to come to worship and to adore Him.

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That He would also give us a renewed burden for the spiritually lost,

to remind us of what their destination will be and how desperate it is and that He would give us the means to be able to reach them through the various avenues of ministry.

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May the LORD bless this to our hearts and to our lives this day and every day until He comes again.

AMEN

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*Our Father in heaven, we read in Your Word,*

*“Lead us in the right path or our enemies will conquer us. Tell us clearly what to do and show us which way to turn.”*

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*Father, this morning, we pray that You would strengthen us as Your children and by Your Spirit would You send us out to serve our community, to love You and to love our neighbours, and to always glorify You and to enjoy You.*

...

*And we ask this and we pray this in Jesus' name, amen.*

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