

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. Those of us schooled from infancy in his ways can become desensitized to their horror.¹

So says Richard Dawkins—the foremost atheistic evolutionist in the world. This isn't the first time I've introduced you to Mr. Dawkins, if you will recall. I quoted him a few months back as well. But such is the presupposition that he maintains. And he is not alone, of course.

For those of us who were here on Wednesday night for Prayer Meeting or our Mid-Week service, we briefly touched upon this belief that is so widely held. And as we come here this Sabbath morning, on the eve of Easter—for which some of you are attending for the precise reason, no doubt—we are confronted with the haunting perception that the God of Easter is not the God of Ezekiel.

But I have news for you friends: who do you think the New Testament writers borrowed their imagery about God from? And where do you think Jesus got His ideas from about God? He, who was but a young Child and had all the limitations that every other child has, scoured the pages of the Hebrew Bible for His understanding of God. And in the parables and stories—and theological concepts—that Jesus shared, He chose to use Old Testament ideas. Contrary to the opinion of many, Jesus didn't simply exclusively rely upon the stories and events of the contemporary Hellenistic world in which He lived. While He certainly played off a lot of those

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 31.

things, the Jesus of Easter most often utilized the imagery, ideas, and theological concepts of the Old Testament—yes, the very Old Testament that God is so often maligned over.

One such concept is what we are going to explore this morning, on the eve of Easter. It's one of my favorite passages in all of Ezekiel. I was absolutely intrigued by this chapter when I first came across it. So intrigued was I by it, in fact, that I wrote a 28 page paper on it for one of my classes in the seminary—a paper that would have most of you asleep by the third page.

So I'd invite you to open the pages of your Bibles to **Ezekiel 34** this morning. And I must say that as you do that, I am going a bit out of order this week as far as our exploration through Ezekiel. Next time I preach here, which will be in another two weeks, we will move back to a previous chapter in Ezekiel. I did it this way so I could preach a sermon that was a little more **“Easter Friendly.”**

But **Ezekiel 34** is the chapter we are going to be exploring this morning. This is one of those chapters that is like the **“Good News/Bad News”** game, except the Bad News comes first in this chapter—which is always better, anyway. But Ezekiel 34 comes in a place in the book that kind of starts a positive part of the book. Previous to this, as we have seen, the message that Ezekiel bears for God is that Israel and Judah have utterly failed. God is crying out to them about their abominations; their wickedness; He's desperately trying to get their attention.

This first part of the chapter is what many people call a “**Woe Oracle.**” Not as in “**Whoah, that’s really awesome,**” but as in “**Woe is me**” or “**Shame on you!**” Throughout the first part of this chapter, God says “**Shame on you!**” over and over again.

And to whom is He saying, “**Shame on you**”? The first couple of verses tell us. God says to Ezekiel, “**Prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. . .**” Make no mistake about it. This “**woe oracle**” is directed to the “**Shepherds of Israel.**” And, just in case we don’t understand that this oracle is directed toward the shepherds, God repeats the word “shepherd” over and over again throughout this chapter. In fact, you may find this little tidbit interesting: the word “**shepherd**” is used in this chapter twice as many times as any other chapter in the whole Old Testament. **Verse two** alone utilizes the word “**shepherd**” more than any other chapter in the Old Testament.

There can be little doubt as to what the subject of this chapter is. God begins the “Bad News” portion of the chapter by laying blame squarely on the doorstep of Judah’s leadership. We kind of touched upon this briefly in the past, looking at another verse, but notice what God claims the shepherds have done. It is not a pretty picture. The shepherds essentially didn’t shepherd at all. They didn’t feed the flock. They didn’t heal the sick. They didn’t bring back the sheep that were driven away. They allowed the sheep to scatter upon the face of the earth without searching for them and bringing them back. **Verse 4** also seems to hint at the idea that they did not lead the people in repentance.

Such is a sad indictment about failed leadership. Time and time again God lays the blame at the feet of His leaders for the sad state of His people.

And is it any different today? I speak, of course, as one of those shepherds.

If you've been paying attention to the news at all the last week or so, you are keenly aware of what happens when leadership goes amok. I don't want to get into politics, but the election debate has been abuzz with the situation that **Barack Obama** has found himself in. For those who don't know, he has been under intense scrutiny and attack for attending a church in Chicago for 20 years whose pastor has hate spewing out of his mouth. I do not care to stand in judgment of the minister, but no one can deny the fact that he holds a tremendous animosity towards the United States.

And Obama's image has suffered because of his association with man. Many are questioning his judgment; questioning whether he, too, holds animosity towards the country he is seeking to serve on the highest level. What happens, people are left wondering, if leadership were to run amok the way it apparently has with Obama's minister?

Failed leadership cuts closer to home with us, of course, as a faith community. We, as a denomination, have seen time and time again what happens when we shepherds lead the sheep astray. I am not separate from such a problem, of course. I am in constant need of re-examining myself to see whether I have been carrying out my duties as a shepherd. Too often I have not done so. And I'm reminded of the sobering quotation from Ellen White. Listen to what she writes:

The first work is to be done for the shepherds of the flock, that they may be warned not to teach their own words instead of God's words, as did the Scribes and

Pharisees. The ministry must be elevated; the men in sacred office must be devoted and God-fearing. One reckless man, irreverent, careless in speech, theatrical in attitude, unconsecrated in spirit, will, through his influence, mould others to do as he does, to act as he acts, and meet the same low standard which he has erected for himself in the place of meeting God's standard. . . .

*We must have a converted ministry, and then the truth will be exalted because it is taught in the life and woven into the character.*²

Of course, this message is somewhat misdirected. The first half of this chapter would be more appropriate for a minister's meeting than a Sabbath-morning worship service. But I want to leave the "**Bad News**" section of this chapter by saying one thing: I am sorry that we, as the shepherds, have failed you. I am sorry that I have failed you, personally, and I am sorry that we, as a corporate entity of shepherds, have led you astray. May it not be so anymore.

Fortunately, God doesn't leave us hanging. After pleading with the shepherds of Israel, He now turns His attention to the sheep, themselves, and **the oracles of restoration**. And what a beautiful picture of God we see in the latter half of the chapter. With beautiful imagery, God declares, "**Indeed, I, Myself, will search for My sheep and seek them out.**"

We don't get as much appreciation in English for what God has just declared in Hebrew. The way He puts it in Hebrew would be very similar to putting the word "**I**" in big, bold, italicized, underlined font. You remember back to your literature or typing days, when they would emphasize that there was only one reason to put something in italics? You remember why that was? To emphasize the word. Same is true of underlining or bold-ing something. When you get an e-mail from a friend, and they have a word in bold or underlining, you know that they want to make sure that the point is so important that they're emphasizing it.

² Ellen G. White, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (Washington, D.C.: The Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 50. All emphasis added.

Well that's what God does here. He says, **"Indeed, I—you know, Me, Myself—I will search for My sheep and seek them out."**

And such is the reality of the Gospel, friends. Does this imagery that God sets forth in this passage sound familiar at all to you? Of course, it does. About 600 years later, God's people found themselves in a similar position, where the leadership had led them astray. So far astray had the leaders led them that when a Revolutionary rose to the scene, and began ministering to those sheep, that leadership criticized Him for it.

And what was that Revolutionary's response? In no uncertain terms, He looked at those leaders, squarely in the eye, and asked them, **"What man among you, having a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does not look for the one until He finds it? And when He finds it, He lays it on His shoulders, rejoicing. And when He comes home, he calls together His friends and throws a party saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep, which was lost!' "**

Where do you think Jesus got this parable from? Where do you think Jesus got this beautiful image of God from? He **"stole"** it from Ezekiel—an Old Testament prophet that allegedly shows a picture of an angry and unforgiving God. The truth is, friends, is that if you want to throw out the Old Testament because it supposedly shows a picture of an angry, unloving God, then you will have to throw out the New Testament as well.

I just ordered a book the other day from Amazon.com that came in the mail. It is a book called *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. It is pretty much a commentary/Encyclopedia of every instance in which a New Testament passage quotes or alludes to an Old Testament passage. It's about 1300 pages long and it is really the first book that exhaustively looks at every passage in the New Testament with this goal.

So I get it the other day in the mail. The package is sitting there on my doorstep and, of course, I can hardly wait to open the box. You know how that goes, don't you? So I open it up and I immediately look at a few passages in the New Testament that are near and dear to my heart—ones that I know, as an Adventist, are playing off Old Testament quotes or images. The one that seems to be most important, as Adventists, is **Revelation 14:6, 7**. You know that one, right? The first angel's message—which, in the Greek—quotes which Old Testament passage?

You know it! Come on! You can do it. **Exodus 20:8-11**—the Sabbath commandment. And do you think that this commentary made that connection? Nope. Totally skips over **Revelation 14:6, 7** altogether. So I look up a few other passages that have personal interest to me. Totally jumps over those ones as well.

But I come to Luke 15, where it talks about the parable of the Lost Sheep. Most commentaries I read do not make a connection to **Ezekiel 34**, so I was really curious to see if this one makes that connection. And I look down and read:

The Pharisees' and scribes' lack of concern and mercy for sinners echoes Ezek. 34, in which Yahweh directs the prophet to speak against the leaders of the nation who neglect their duties and leave Israel scattered "like sheep without a shepherd," announcing that Yahweh himself will seek out, rescue, and care for the sheep. Jesus'

parable indicts the scribes and Pharisees for their failure to be the faithful shepherds of Yahweh's flock and implies that Jesus' love and mercy for the sinners is consistent with Yahweh's mercy and care for his sheep.³

Notice what the author proposes: Jesus' love and mercy for sinners is “**consistent**” with Yahweh's mercy and care for His sheep. So, not only does Jesus, in essence, stand up in front of the leaders and announce that He is the fulfillment of this prophecy, but He announces that His actions are consistent with the actions of the God of the Old Testament. They are one and the same.

And isn't that the reality of God's love, friends? The seeking God of the New Testament is the same seeking God of the Old Testament? The seeking God of the Easter is the seeking God of Ezekiel.

And yet, that is a profound mystery in and of itself—that the God we serve could be a “**seeking**” God at all. But that is what the scriptures attest to. Nowhere outside of the Holy Bible will you ever find a God who seeks. Islam's *Koran* doesn't show that; Hindu's *Veda* or *Upanishads* don't show that. Confucian's *Five Classics* don't show that. Each of these books—and, indeed, each of these religions—present the image of our necessity of finding God. But the God of the Holy Bible—the God of the New Testament *and* the Old Testament—shows a seeking God.

What does Ezekiel's God say? “**Indeed, I, Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.**” Have you ever felt like you were the one doing the searching—as if God was playing hide-and-go-seek and you can't find Him?

³ David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 341.

For the last six or seven months, I have been following the saga of a woman who simply identifies herself as “**Vera**.” She’s a blogger on the Internet, posting her messages about her faith journey and interacting with people who reflect upon her ideas. In her very first posting, where she introduced herself, this is what she wrote:

I grew up in a fundamentalist Seventh-day Adventist home, one full of Ellen G. White and the health message, with dashes of apocalyptic showdowns thrown in for good measure. I attended the local church school all the way through elementary school, and three of my four high school years were at an Adventist boarding academy. I graduated from an Adventist institution of higher learning. I've personally worked for the church, and my husband is currently a professional Seventh-day Adventist (I get such a kick out of that term).

I'm not a scientist, and I don't have a scientific background. I'm also not a theologian, and I often think I'm not a very good Christian (and evolution aside, I'm a bad Adventist, at least in my own mind). Prayer baffles me, and I'm not sure what God is all about. Perhaps I can best be described as a slow, dogged seeker of the truth, whatever the truth is. Although I prefer the stability of black-and-white thinking, I am also suspicious (sometimes reactively so) of it. As a result, I am certain about very little in this life and not at all about any future ones.⁴

Here is a woman who is searching for God; searching for truth; searching for something. Sad to say, her recent postings have revealed the haunting reality that she has, essentially, surrendered to the idea that this world was brought about through the evolutionary process of chance, and that God doesn’t exist. She is giving up on her Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, while holding onto her Seventh-day Adventist culture.

Perhaps it’s oversimplifying it a bit, but I have a hard time believing that “**Vera**” ever got the message that God was the one searching for her, not the other way around. Again and again the beautiful truth presents itself to us: “**Indeed, I, Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.**”

⁴ <http://wishingdoesntmakeitso.blogspot.com/2007/05/where-i-come-from-part-i.html>

And what about you? Do you realize that it is not your job to seek and search for God? The God of Easter and the God of Ezekiel attest to the beautiful truth that God is seeking after us. He is the One looking for us. And Luke tells us that He will search for us “**until He finds us.**”

Interestingly, I love another sheep-shepherd picture that Ezekiel, no doubt, plays off of. It’s a passage that we all know very well. David wrote it a few hundred years before Ezekiel penned the same ideas. What does **Psalm 23** say? You know it well, “**The Lord is my Shepherd. . .**” But there is another portion of this chapter that is grossly understated in our English versions. The first time I ever translated this passage from the Hebrew, I was so excited about this truth. I had to translate it for a class at the seminary, and when I came across **verse 6** I got so excited.

What does your translation say? “**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me . . .**” But that translation is so muted when it comes to the beauty of David’s message—one that closely matches that of Ezekiel’s. Literally, the verse reads that “**goodness and mercy shall pursue me.**” In my mind, “**following**” and “**pursuing**” are worlds apart. God doesn’t simply follow us around like a little puppy dog, trying to keep up with us. Both **Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34** attest to the reality that God passionately pursues us.

“**Indeed, I, Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. I will pursue them.**” That is the reality of both Testaments of scripture. God seeks and pursues us. And He does that “**all the days**” of our lives. He doesn’t stop doing it until He finds us.

I don't watch very many movies these days—at least I try not to. Usually when I do watch one I am thoroughly disappointed—both in the movie, and the fact that I watched it. Even less often do I talk about a particular movie from the pulpit. But there is a movie that I watched recently that is worth your time, if you're into movies at all. I mentioned it in Prayer Meeting last week, I think, and a central theme of this movie speaks beautifully to our text today.

The movie is called *Amazing Grace*. Have you seen it? The movie follows the life of William Wilberforce, a British politician who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries. Wilberforce is an amazing historical figure. What was so significant about his life, however, is that he worked nearly his whole political career to abolish slavery in Great Britain. Three days before his death, parliament voted to enact the **Slavery Abolition Act** in 1833, effectively ending slavery in all of the United Kingdom.

The movie is called *Amazing Grace* because it details Wilberforce's personal religious struggle also, including his encounters with John Newton—that former slave-ship captain who penned the words to the song “Amazing Grace.” What I found most profound about the whole movie, though, was a point in which Wilberforce's religious struggles finally reach a climax, and he comes to a place where his convictions become solidified in his own mind and life. I don't know how much of the dialogue is true to life, but a friend of his is talking with him and says, “**So, you've found God?**” And with a short pause, Wilberforce profoundly responds, “**I don't know so much as I've found God, as He's found me.**”

The writers of the script understand the message of Jesus. They understand the message of Easter. They understand the message of the Old Testament. They understand the message of Ezekiel. It is not that we are looking for God and that we need to find Him, friends, it's that *He* is looking for us. Indeed, He is pursuing us.

“But Pastor,” you say, **“Doesn’t Jesus tells us to seek the kingdom of God? Doesn’t the Old Testament also tell us to search for Him with all of our hearts?”** Yes, it does, but that seeking, that searching, that pursuing, is only a response to the reality of God finding us. We are not doing it to try to find an elusive God; we only search the depths of His love after we have been found by Him.

“Indeed, I, Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.” Isn’t that what Easter is all about, after all? God coming down to us; searching for us; pursuing us; going all the way to the cross to find us, and then, after so doing, rising again so we can enjoy the pleasures of the loving Shepherd for life evermore.

I’d like to end with a story this morning. It’s a long story, but I’ve come to realize that you don’t mind long stories. It’s a heart-warming, heart-rendering story that wonderfully illustrates the beauty of God’s constant pursuing. Perhaps you’ve read this story or heard about it. I told you about it a few weeks ago and I notice you’ve faithfully returned to hear it.

Isn't that the reality of Easter, friends? Jesus asked, "**Where's Molly? Where's Gary? Where's Bob? Where's Holly? Where's Hannah? Where's Rachel?**" and He came down to pursue and search for us. Thankfully, He never gave up on us; He never stopped pursuing. And now He says of all of us, "**We're a team!**"