

Think for a minute about how different your life would be if certain details were changed. Instead of the parents you have, what if you were born to different parents? Instead of this country, what would it be if you were born in a different country? Instead of the school, friends, and house you live in, what would change if each of those were entirely different? You might not even be who you are today. You would be someone different.

It might be fun to imagine the possibilities of being someone else, born somewhere else, living a totally different life. We usually imagine life better than it is of course. Living a different life would mean a different you and your faith might be different. Instead of a family of believers you may have been born to unbelievers who wanted nothing to do with church. Instead of coming regularly to soak in God's Word you might never have known Christianity at all. Instead of believing in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins you might have continued thinking you could save yourself or that there was nothing to be saved from. Imagine how terrifying life would be if that detail was changed.

Ezekiel, the author of the first lesson, doesn't want you to think about that possibility. He's speaking to the Old Testament people of Israel but what he says applies to us today. He describes life not as it might be different, but life as it is...

**Life under the Shepherd
Find peace for your life
Find freedom under your God**

It's the perfect wedding, planned down to the finest detail. The bride arrives at the decorated church in a white limo. She walks in finding white runners already on the floor. The flowers are all stationed precisely. The music is glorious. The dresses look stunning. The groom is there. The guests arrive, take their seats, and everything starts and ends with military precision. Welcome to marriage under a wedding planner. Now imagine the wedding without said wedding planner. The bride drives her own car because no one picks her up. The floor runner is rolled up in the corner. The flowers are scattered where they're not supposed to be. The music is barely heard. The dresses are wrinkled. The groom is there. The guests arrive late, and the whole timing is off.

Earlier Ezekiel wrote to the people of Israel about life under the religious leaders, the supposed shepherds of God's people. These individuals were charged with caring spiritually for the people, but they weren't doing it. **"My shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock."** Ezekiel received a vision that it was God who would make up for the religious leader's lapse. **"This is what the Sovereign Lord says, I myself will search for my sheep and look after them."** God would be their religious leader. God himself would be the Shepherd.

Without proper spiritual leaders our spiritual life would be in shambles. We'd be putting ourselves in danger. Like sheep facing wild animals, we might hang out with the wrong crowd and be influenced by people to question or believe false teachings. They may even encourage us to bad behavior. Like rains that never come because of drought, without the constant Word of God we might go it alone. It shouldn't surprise us when sin results in leading us away from God. Like a field that never bears crops, if we refuse the connection to God we will continue to be enslaved by our sinful nature. This will lead us only further from God.

Life has changed. Our life is under the Shepherd, Christ Jesus. **"I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety."** The Shepherd makes peace with us through a promise so he might rule over us in peace. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is the only one who brings true peace from God. No more wild beasts, like Satan or evil angels. Jesus has defeated them. **"I will send showers..."** No more drought of God's Word. Jesus makes his Word accessible to us like a showering rain. **"The trees will yield their fruit..."** No more fruitless lives because Jesus has given us strength to produce fruit in keeping with forgiveness of sins. **"They will know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them."** The yoke of sin and death has been removed and thrown off by Christ. This is life under the Shepherd.

Unfortunately life in this perfection will have to wait. We do live under the Shepherd right now. We do have many blessings from him. We live in safety and protection. We live under his watchful eyes. His awesome power provides for us. Christ Jesus takes away our sins and grants us new life. He assures us the glory is waiting. Perfection is just around the corner. For now life is under the Shepherd soaking in the nourishing rain of God's Word and going back to it to avoid sin and slavery. We have life under the Shepherd and there we find peace.

Two things you want from sheep if you're the shepherd. They must trust your voice. You don't want them following another flock. They must trust you have their best interests at heart. That gives them peace. The other thing you want is for the sheep to have freedom. They must roam, graze, and enjoy the safety provided by you, the shepherd. Christ our Good Shepherd provides us with peace by way of the covenant he made with us on the cross. Christ also provides us with freedom. It's part of our life under the Shepherd.

I had tremendous freedom growing up. My best friend lived across the street and I rarely if ever had to tell my mom and dad when I left the house. They knew it was likely down the street. In that freedom I could go many other places without telling them when I was a little older. It was wonderful. The reality of course was my parents gave that freedom under their watchful eye. I didn't think about it, but they always knew where I was. They knew I was safe. I would come home when I got hungry. Any freedom I had was freedom they provided and granted.

Sheep can have freedom. They can graze, but only so far. They can walk around, but only so far. They have freedom, but always within the structures provided by the shepherd. The people of Israel wanted freedom. You want freedom too. You want to be away from your parents, away from responsibility, and away from the things that make life hard. Getting out of a bad situation, that's freedom. Being out from under someone else's watchful eye, that's freedom. God's always watching and sometimes it gets a bit much. We figure if we could escape then we'd be free. We want to roam, each time a little further from God. We want to graze on different life experiences, some of which God wouldn't approve of. We always want more, we never find satisfaction. That passes for freedom. No restrictions, that's freedom. Our sinful desire is to want to be free from God, his watchful eyes, and his rules.

Freedom isn't what the world thinks of freedom. **"Then they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Sovereign Lord."** True freedom is having freedom within the structures provided by the Shepherd. Freedom is only free if the Shepherd is watching, protecting, and providing. Freedom comes from knowing the Lord is God and he sent Jesus for us. He's the one who reveals the Lord who saves us. He calls us into a relationship with him through his resurrection from the dead. That's the centerpiece of his saving activity. A Shepherd Savior who does that is worthy of being followed. Following him isn't slavery, it's freedom. What Christ has done for us by living perfectly and dying sacrificially brings us from the slavery of sin to the freedom of Jesus.

The Shepherd gives us freedom to live, live to serve our God. **"You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord."** We belong to him. He claims us. He gives us freedom under his protection. Don't use that freedom to tempt him, but serve him. He brings us into his wonderful pastures. There we have freedom to praise him for his wonderful acts. Don't use that to swear against him but worship him. Jesus is our Great Shepherd. He gives us freedom from worry or fear. He gives hope and comfort. We live under the Shepherd and we find freedom under our God.

It's hard to imagine life any different. Changing just one variable means it isn't your life anymore. One thing different could mean much different results in your life. Life under a different spiritual caregiver would be extremely different. But that variable isn't different. We need what God provides. We need peace we can't win ourselves. We need freedom we get only from God. We get that all in life under the Shepherd.