

A promise that lasts

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 0 0] Well, big news for our country this week. Cyril Ramaphosa replaced Jacob Zuma as ANC president. I don't know how you feel about that. Personally, I kind of like the guy. He's always smiling. Have you noticed that about Cyril? He always seems to have a smile on his face. I don't mind having a smiley president if he becomes president of our country, of course, which he may or may not, depending on God's will.

But this was obviously seen as good news this week because the RAND strengthened to a nine-month high the moment that Ramaphosa replaced Zuma as ANC president. The markets were bolstered. Investors became more confident in the future of South Africa.

But, of course, to get where he's at, Ramaphosa made a lot of promises, didn't he? He promised that if he becomes president, he will root out corruption. He will work towards job creation and generally make South Africa a better place to live.

Sounds like normal political rhetoric. We hear it from all politicians, don't we? And yet, even though politicians say that and we know they have to say that to get votes and to get placed into power, we still listen.

And we still hope that what they say is true. We like what we hear because what they say is what we all want, isn't it? We hope we can eventually find a leader who will do those things because no matter who you are sitting here this morning, white, black, rich, poor, we all want a better society, don't we?

[1 : 2 5] We all want a better society to live in no matter who we are. A society where there's justice and where there's peace and where there's prosperity. Where you don't have to take your pepper spray when you walk the dog to the park.

Where you don't have to worry about crime. Where society works. Don't you want that? Of course we do. And we listen to those politicians who tell us that they promise to give us those things.

And we should pray that they're empowered and they're given the desire to follow through. But what if I told you this morning it's not just politicians who make promises like that.

Of a better society. You see, God also makes promises to us. Of a better society. For example, in Ezekiel, which John read for us earlier.

Listen again to what God promises for his people, the Israelites. Listen carefully. God describes Israel using this analogy as a flock of sheep. And he says to them, I will bring them, this is from verse 13, I will bring them into their own land.

[2 : 3 3] I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in good pasture. And the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land.

And there they will find feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. Okay, so now this is an analogy God is using. He's not just promising his people that they'll be able to eat grass.

Because they're not really sheep. Okay, it's an analogy. And so when he's promising rich pasture for his people, he's promising them that they will live in a place where they won't lack anything.

Where they will be satisfied. Just like sheep are satisfied when they're grazing on, you know, lush green grass. Have you ever seen sheep grazing in a green field?

I mean, okay, we don't have many green fields left in the Western Cape at the moment. But if you think back to, you know, when you're driving on the N2 past Caledon, and you see all those green fields, and every now and again you'll see a flock of sheep.

[3 : 38] And they're just head down, and they're munching on that nice green grass. And they're in the element, not a care in the world. For a sheep, when they've got green grass in front of them, they've got everything they could ever want.

They're simple creatures. And that's what God wanted for his people, see, as a nation. He wanted them to be in a place where they had everything they could ever want.

Where they were satisfied. Where they had no care in the world. A land of plenty. That is what God wanted for his people. But there's more. From verse 25, he says, Okay, so more than just provide for them, God also wanted his people to be safe.

To have safety. Isn't that something we want in our society? That's what God wants for the people in his new society. You see, the savage beasts here are symbols of anything that can harm his people.

Crime. War. Disease. The things that we, whether we consciously recognize it or not. The things that we are scared of. The things in the back of our minds that we fear.

[4 : 51] Cancer. And crime. God wanted his people to be safe from these things. And not have to worry about them. But that's not all. He goes on.

Verse 26, I will make them and the places surrounding my hill a blessing. I will send down showers in season. There will be showers of blessing.

The trees will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops. The people will be secure in their land. And so God also wanted to give his people a place to live where even nature works the way it's meant to.

With fruit growing in season. And notice no droughts. No water restrictions. You can shower for as long as you want in God's new society. Doesn't that sound like a great place to live?

Doesn't that sound like the place we all actually want to live? The society we all want to be part of? Where there's no want. There's no stress. There's no danger.

[5 : 52] Where everything works the way it's meant to. Don't you want to live in a society like that? Well see, that's the kind of society that God wants his people to live in.

God doesn't want his people to live in a broken society. So he promised to bring his chosen people, the nation of Israel, into this new kind of society. And it wasn't only in Ezekiel.

Throughout the Old Testament, God had been promising his people a new place to live in. Where they could have everything they could want. Where they were safe. Where they were secure. Where they were satisfied.

And, as we continue reading in the Old Testament, we see it wasn't just meant to be for Israel. It was meant to start in Israel and then overflow to the rest of the world. To the surrounding nations and to the rest of the world.

God was going to use that nation of Israel to bless the rest of the world and create this new restored society. And so we wouldn't have to have presidents making promises that they can't keep.

[6 : 54] And so whatever happened? If you go to Israel today, it's not exactly the idyllic society that God planned. I can tell you, I've been there.

There are terrorists. There are wars. There are refugee camps. Did God fail to make good on his promises like some politician? Well, no.

Because the way he promised to bring his people into this new idyllic society were through leaders, kings and priests that he would appoint, which he called the shepherds of his flock.

Who would lead Israel with God's word, the Bible, the scriptures and God's law to know and follow God's ways. Because you can't have the kind of society God wants for his people without following God's ways and his instructions.

And so he appointed these leaders, these shepherds, these teachers, these kings to lead people to follow God's ways. But it turns out, that's not what they did.

[7 : 59] Because listen to how Ezekiel 34 actually begins. I'll read it again. The word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.

Prophesy and say to them, this is what the sovereign Lord says. Woe to you, shepherds of Israel, who only take care of yourselves. Should not shepherds take care of the flock?

You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured.

You have not brought back the strays or searched for the last. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd. And when they were scattered, they became food for all the wild animals.

My sheep wandered all over the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth and no one searched or looked for them. So now we're here, we find out why Israel failed to be the society that God wanted them to be.

[9 : 05] It's because Israel's leaders failed to do their job. Rather than lead and teach the sheep of God's flock, they instead used their power for their own benefit.

Well, that's what Jesus is talking about here in John chapter 10. Then, as we turn to John 10, he's talking about sheep and shepherds. And we think, okay, maybe he's just using some nice pictures to teach us about himself.

But actually, he's using the language of Ezekiel to make a point about the leaders of Israel in his day. Listen to what he says to them. This is John 10 from verse 10.

No, it's not. It's from verse 1, excuse me. John 10 from verse 1. Very truly I tell you that anyone who does not enter the sheep in by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him and the sheep listen to his voice. Verse 5. But they will never follow a stranger. In fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize the stranger's voice.

[10 : 09] And then verse 7, Jesus says, Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. Okay, so what exactly is he talking about? Well, here's a tip.

Whenever we read the Bible, we've got to read it in context. We've got to read it, especially the Gospels, in light of what's just happened. And think back to what's just happened in the Gospel of John, in the narrative. Chapter 9.

If you were here last week, you'll remember there was this blind man who was healed, and then he got into an argument with the Jewish leaders. He told them they were stupid not to believe in who Jesus is.

And, of course, they didn't take that too well. He got excommunicated, and he became a follower of Jesus. Well, that's what Jesus is talking about here in chapter 10.

This man didn't listen to the Pharisees because they are no longer the shepherds they're meant to be. They're more like thieves and robbers. They're hopping over the wall to harm God's flock.

[11 : 04] They're not leading people to God and good pasture because they're ignoring the gate, which is Jesus. That's essentially what he's saying to these Pharisees, to these leaders. They are not leading the sheep to where they're supposed to be.

And they're really only interested in benefiting themselves. Their leadership is a scam. But, of course, that's true of human leadership in every age, isn't it?

Leaders tend to use their power, first and foremost, for their own benefit. We've seen it in our own country. We are witnesses firsthand of leadership that is misused to benefit no one but the leader.

The state capture. But you can see it throughout history. I mean, if you've been around long enough, you may have lived through when communism was the great threat to the Western world.

The grand Soviet experiment in Russia during most of the 20th century where the country, Russia, was run on communist principles. Now, they sounded great. I don't know if you've ever looked into it.

[12 : 07] But communism promises a perfect society. Communism promises green pastures where there's no poverty. There's no want. Everybody has what they need.

And it sounded great on paper. But it didn't work in practice. We've seen in the last hundred years. Why? Why didn't it work? Well, because it didn't account for the selfishness of those who would run it.

Communism failed because its leaders misused their power for their own benefit rather than for the people's benefit. And that's also why the nation of Israel failed. Because its leaders failed to be the shepherds they were meant to be.

That's what Jesus is saying here in John 10. But the thing is, nothing takes God by surprise. God knew this would happen. God established the nation of Israel.

He appointed these shepherds knowing that they would fall. Knowing that they would not succeed in being the leaders who will lead people to God. And so even back in Ezekiel, he made another promise, which I'll read to you.

[13 : 09] Ezekiel 34 from verse 7. He says, Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord. As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals.

And because my shepherds did not search for my flock, but cared for themselves rather than for my flock. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says.

I'm against the shepherds, and I will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

For this is what the Sovereign Lord says. I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with him, so I will look after my sheep.

I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. So God said a time would come when he would fire all the shepherds.

[14 : 13] Anyone watch The Apprentice? Anyone seen The Apprentice? Remember when either if you watch The U.S. Apprentice Donald Trump or The U.K. Apprentice Lord Alan Sugar, that part at the end of the show when he says, you're fired.

It's the famous line of the show, he fires an apprentice each week. Well, God is doing that to his sheep, I mean to his shepherds, the shepherds of Israel, the leaders of Israel.

He's pointing at them and he's saying, you're fired. You failed. And then, not only does he fire them, but he himself promises to come down and be the shepherd in their place, to take his people to the new society that he's always promised.

To gather all his lost sheep from around the world and then bring them together as one flock and take them forward where the human leaders could never take them.

Well, here in John 10, we discover that's exactly what's happening. That promise in Ezekiel is being fulfilled. Jesus says, I am the good shepherd. Jesus is the fulfillment of God promising to come down and shepherd his people personally.

[15 : 23] Right now in John 10, those leaders of Israel are being fired and Jesus is replacing them. And what happened in John 9 with the blind man is an illustration of that.

He is no longer following the Pharisees. He's pointing in their face and he's turning his back on them and he's following Jesus instead because he discovered, this man discovered, he is the true shepherd.

And so through Jesus, God is going to lead his people to a new society to which no human leader can lead them. So think about that for a second.

Following Jesus isn't just about improving our lives a little bit. Following Jesus isn't just about making sure we have an insurance policy for eternity.

Following Jesus is about believing that if we follow him, he will take us to the world that we're all longing for. That he will fulfill all of our needs that we look to in this world to fulfill.

[16 : 22] That the world continues to fail to fulfill. Jesus promises to fulfill. He is the shepherd who will take us to where the other shepherds failed to take us. The hope that Christians have in Jesus is a real solid, concrete hope for a new society that everybody in our world is longing for.

And that we are deep down longing for. That is the promise that Jesus gives us if we follow him. He says, I am the good shepherd. And if we understand what the image of a shepherd is in the Old Testament, then we understand that his promise is great.

But how does he do that? How does Jesus then take us to this new society that we all long for and we all want? How does he bring people to this new world? Well, he tells us in verse 11.

Have a look. He says, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And so there, Jesus can take us to a place where no other human leaders can take us because he does something that no other human leaders can do for us.

You see, the thing that's preventing the sheep from grazing in abundant pastures, from living in this idyllic society, are the savage beasts that threaten to slaughter them.

[17 : 46] Jesus talks about the wolf. And that wolf, if we read our Bibles, the greatest threat to humanity is sin. Throughout the Old Testament, sin, the people's sin, is what kept them from entering the life that he wanted for them in the nation of Israel.

Their sin kept on messing that up. But it's the same for us. The sin in our hearts, in your heart, in my heart.

And you know it's there. You confessed it was there earlier in the service. And unless you were just saying it because it was on the screen, you didn't really believe it, you know you're a sinner. And even if you were just mouthing the words, if you examine yourself, you'll know that you are not the ingredients of a perfect society because the sin in your heart, the sin in my heart, is what prevents us from living in a perfect world.

And that's why our society is broken. It's not because presidents have failed us. It's not because of something out there that's wrong. It's because of something in here that's wrong.

It's our sin that prevents us from living in the world that God wants his people to live in. That's the beast that Jesus came to battle for us as our shepherd.

[19 : 09] He put himself in the way of it and he was slaughtered by it so that his sheep could live and have green pastures. Isn't that such an image of the shepherd seeing a wolf coming for his people to slaughter them?

And the shepherd, instead of running away like any other human leader would do, he does and he runs towards the threat. He puts himself in the way of it and he is killed by it so that his sheep can be safe.

That's what Jesus has done for his people with sin and death. And that's what he's doing here in John. And he's heading straight to Jerusalem, knowing that his death, his crucifixion, is in front of him and he doesn't run away like anybody else would.

He goes straight to it because he knows that he's got to go through that to save his sheep, to let them have life. And that's why it says in verse 10, I have come that they may have life.

He's talking about his sheep. And not just have life, but have it to the full. Because real life, full life, can only be experienced when sin is defeated.

[20 : 16] You will never experience life, proper full life, until your sin is dealt with. And that's why Jesus came. That's why he alone is the gate to the new perfect world that we all long for.

Because only he has dealt with our sin when he died on behalf of his sheep. But now how do we know who those sheep are? He talks about his sheep as if they're separate from the rest of society.

Not everyone is automatically his sheep. So who are those who he has put himself in the way for and died for to save? Who, in other words, can look forward to this new society that God has been promising throughout Scripture?

Well, Jesus says, his sheep are the ones who listen to his voice, rather than the voices of the world. Verse 4, he says, When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him, because they know his voice.

Just like this blind man who was healed, who stopped listening to the leaders of Israel, and started listening to Jesus to lead him to life. In fact, his healing, his restoration of sight, was a foretaste of the new world, of the new life, that Jesus is going to lead his people to.

[21 : 39] And this man is going to have far more than his sight restored, when he follows Jesus to that new life. But that's what marks out who are the sheep of Jesus. Those who actually listen to his voice.

And I'm not just saying those who let sound waves enter their ear. Those who come to church and just passively sit and hear.

No, those who listen. In fact, we've seen in our evening service the last year, the idea of listening in the Bible is listening and responding. Not just passively listening. Those who listen and actually respond, and stop following the voices of the world, and follow the voice of Jesus in their daily life.

Those are the sheep who can look forward to abundance. The question is, is that you? Which voices are you following to lead you to abundance, I wonder?

What people are you following and listening to that you believe, if you follow them, if you follow those ideas, if you live that lifestyle, then you will have life and abundance?

[22 : 45] What voices are you actually following? It's a good question for us all to ask. Because you know what? We are all sheep at the end of the day. I think that's another thing that this illustration in Ezekiel, and John 10, and the Psalms, often speaks about people as sheep.

And it's not a very flattering thing to be described as. Sheep are stupid. Sheep have no ability to look after themselves. Sheep have to follow someone.

Well, that's us. Whether you know it or not, you're not independent. You all have to follow. We all have to follow something or someone. We all tend to pin our hopes on other people to take us to a better world, to improve our lives.

Whether it's political figures that promise us a better society that we back, or whether it's lifestyle gurus who promise us a better life if we follow their teachings. And you look at magazines on the shelf.

Go to spa, stand in the queue. Look at all those magazines. You can either look at the soccer or the magazines. The soccer is much better. But every now and again, I'll drift my eyes over to the magazines, and I'll see what's on the front covers.

[23 : 52] You know, almost all of it is promises for greener pastures, isn't it? If you follow these ten steps, if you change this in your life, then you will have abundance. You will have a satisfying life.

All about how to improve your health or your relationships. Promises of greener pastures. We are surrounded by promises of green pastures every day.

Promises of abundance. And you know what? We listen to them because we're sheep. We can't help but we need to listen to someone. Well, Jesus teaches here that the true people of God, His sheep, are the ones who listen to His voice for life and abundance.

They follow Him and not the voices of the world. And that's what marks out who are His sheep. And the voice of Jesus is heard through His Word.

So as we come to sit under the Word and study it and obey it, that's how we follow the voice of the true Shepherd into life. But is that where you are looking for green pasture?

[24 : 57] In His Word? In following the Shepherd? Or are you still seeking it in the world out there? You can tell by how much you're listening to the world versus how much you're reading the Bible.

I mean, that's a simple litmus test for which voice you're really following. How much you're reading magazines versus how much you're reading God's Word.

Because you can't do both. You've got to choose your Shepherd. That's what I want to challenge you to do this morning. I want you to choose your Shepherd. Choose which voice you're going to follow from this day onwards for life and abundance.

And if that is Jesus, if His voice is the one that you have chosen to listen to and follow, then listen to what else He says. Verse 16 of John 10.

He says, And so Jesus still has other sheep to call into this new society.

[26 : 04] And that's why we're not there yet. That's why we have to wait for it. It is coming for those who are following Jesus, for those who have trusted in Him. It is coming, but it's not here yet because Jesus is still gathering His flock today.

That is what this age is about. That is the only thing that really matters in this world, in this chapter of history, is that this is the time that Jesus is gathering His flock, His scattered flock, from all around the world.

people all over the world who when they hear His voice, something happens in their heart. People in Iraq, people in Korea, people in China, people in Japan, people in Lithuania, people in Canada, people in Brazil.

All over the world, there are people when they hear the voice of Jesus, something changes and they stop following the voices of the world and they start following Jesus.

There might be people that you work with, people in your family, people that you will sit down at the table for Christmas lunch with tomorrow.

[27 : 15] Because every single one of those people at the lunch table are wanting a better world, whether they admit it or not. They're wanting a better life. Well, Jesus came to be the one person who can lead them to that life.

They just don't know it yet. They haven't heard His voice. That's why they don't know it yet. They haven't heard the voice of the true shepherd. Well, how will they? Through you and me.

And I'm not going to be at that Christmas table, so through you. Jesus calls the scattered sheep together through His church today, through you and me. So we need to go to those other sheep who are still scattered, wandering aimlessly in life, and we need to tell them about the good shepherd who came to earth to defeat their sin and give them life to the full.

And so will you, if you are one of His sheep, will you tell them? Starting tomorrow. In fact, you have one of the best opportunities of the year to get people to church tomorrow.

Don't waste it. Will you come here when we are going to look at what Jesus meant when He said, having life to the full, and will you invite someone to come with you so that they can hear the voice of the good shepherd for themselves and so that they too can follow Him to the abundant pastures that they are searching for.

[28 : 46] What a privilege that we can be used in bringing people to life through Christ. Will you be involved in that mission not just tomorrow, but in 2018 and for the rest of your life?

Well, let's pray that God would empower us to do that. Amen. Yes, Lord, we thank You so much that You didn't leave us under the leadership of sinful, fallen people who really can't take us to life, but You came Yourself in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ to lead us to where we could never go ourselves.

Thank You, Lord, that You want us to live in a better world. Thank You, Lord, that You have given Yourself, Lord Jesus, to die for our sins so that we can live in a better world.

Lord, we pray that as we look forward to eternity as Your sheep, we pray that we would start right now to live as Your people, to show others the way to greener pastures.

Help us to do that practically, Lord, as we give ourselves to improve the lives of others. But as we do that, Lord, may we always be ready to tell them about Jesus so that through us You can call Your sheep to abundant life.

[30 : 11] And Lord, I do pray also for anybody here this morning who is not following You, who is not one of Your sheep, who is still following the voices of the world. Would You do a work in their heart this morning to help them to realize that You alone can lead them to the life that they're looking for because You alone have died for their sins.

Help them to trust in that. Help them to turn and to follow You into life. We pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen.