

Series: Why Bother?  
**Why Bother with Church?**

Ezekiel 34

Sermon by Teaching Pastor Paul Joslin  
 Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado  
 Sunday morning, August 4, 2024

All right, how is everyone doing today? It is good to see you. I am really excited for this series, “Why bother?” I think it is going to be a really important series in the life of our church. We are asking the question, “Why do we bother with church?” and we want to create space for honesty about people’s experience in church. The hope is that by providing space for honesty about church sometimes being messy, hard, and difficult, that we can provide space also for hope and for healing, and one of the ways we want to lean into that question is actually through this series. We want to invite the scripture readers to share a little bit of their testimony of their experience with church, the good, the bad, and the ugly, and everything in between, and so today I have the privilege of inviting Natalia to the stage. She is one of our students in our student ministry. Would you welcome Natalia up to the stage? She is awesome. She has actually just graduated and is getting ready to go to college. This is one of her last Sundays with us, but we are so excited for her future, and she is going to read for us today the passage we are studying after she shares a little bit about her story with church, so Natalia, yeah, thanks.

Hi, everybody. My name is Natalia O’Connor, and as Paul was saying, I just graduated from Green Mountain High School over in Lakewood, and now I will be going to Colorado State University to study business administration. Thank you, guys, so I just wanted to talk a little bit about my testimony and some of my story here at Waterstone. I have been at pretty much Waterstone my entire life. I started coming here with my aunt and my uncle, Rosemarie and Kerry Otten, love you both so much, and I love this church so much. I have grown up meeting people here, getting to know staff, the students, and everyone that has come in and out of this building, and I have loved this place so, so much, but of course with every rose are a couple of thorns. So, I really struggled with Covid, like a lot of people did, and a lot of my friends decided to leave church or moved to a different church, and so the group that provided me safety and sanctuary was gone, and that was really difficult for me, alongside the fact that we started having leadership changes, and almost all of our student leadership had been wiped out, and we were bringing in a bunch of new staff all at the same time, so it was very difficult for me, because I felt very unmotivated to be here at church, and I lost some motivation to stay engaged. However, there were a lot of reasons why I stayed, and one of the most important was that our new staff engaged with me very well. I am very grateful for them, because they pulled me back into the worship spotlight, and I love being able to work with the high school worship team for the last four years. It has been an absolute blast, and Waterstone has just continued to love me like a family, regardless of who is in this building. Every time I walk in here, I feel welcome, so as I leave for college, I just want to leave you guys with a couple of things. I just wanted to say that the community that Waterstone provides is ever-changing, and the love will always remain consistent. Waterstone will welcome you with open arms, regardless of your background and where you have come from, and will change your life, but only if you let it, so with that, I’d like to give you a reading from Ezekiel 34.

“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 shepherds not take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourself

with wool, and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak, nor healed the sick, or bound the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.’ Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord. ‘Surely, as I live,’ declares the sovereign Lord, ‘because my flock lacks a shepherd, and so has been plundered and 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 am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock, so that the shepherds can no longer feed them-selves. 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. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down,’ declares the sovereign Lord. ‘I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd this flock with justice,’””” the word of the Lord.

Oh, man. Thanks so much Natalia, and yeah, you can be looking forward to more stories like that. Some weeks they may be like Natalia’s, some of the good and bad. Some weeks we are maybe just going to sit in the heart, and we want to make space for that in this series.

I think it’s really important that as we start this series, that we just name the elephant in the room. We’re starting with this question, “Why bother with church?” That is the first week in this series, and I do not know if you know this, but I am a pastor., which means inherently I am asking this question, and the implication is I am going to try to provide an answer for why you should bother with church. That is just inherent in the setup we have right now. I am a pastor. I am on the stage. I have the microphone for the next thirty minutes. If you are there listening to me, you think I am going to answer that question, and that inherently creates a level of skepticism. Let’s just be honest, because as a pastor, I need people to bother with church. That is just part of the job description, and more than that, part of my livelihood, honestly. If I want to clothe my kids, they just had back-to-school shopping for kindergarten, Camden. Man, that is a deal. Target is expensive these days, right? So, I need people to bother with church. I need people to show up and care about church, so inherently, when I ask the question why you should bother with church and say we are going to talk about church hurt and spiritual abuse and things that happen in church that go wrong, inherently there is a degree of separation that we just have to be honest about and name, because it is hard for you not to think that I am coming with some sort of an agenda.

What I want you to hear is I think there is no way past that. I believe in the church. That is why I am a pastor, but my purpose today is not to just simply say you need to keep showing up at church so that I can feed my kids waffles in the morning. That’s not the purpose. The hope is that in this series, Waterstone has always been a church that wants to lean into hard conversations and that wants to be honest about what we see in the world, and that is what we want to do in this series. We do not want to hide the fact that there are a lot of negative headlines in the church, so inherently, stepping into this series, there is this separation we have to acknowledge, but that is before we even get to the reality that sometimes church is really messed up. It is really, really terrible. Everything that has been going on in our culture over the last few years, I feel like there’s just been this situation where the church has a huge public relations problem, and not a public relations problem in that, “Oh, yeah, that is kind of bad,” but there are some really terrible things that have happened, everything from the Instagram account, preachers and sneakers. Some of you know what I am talking about, where there was literally a guy that would go around and find

out how expensive different pastors' clothing and shoes were, and some pastors were wearing thousand-dollar shoes to preach in the pulpit. What is that?

These shoes I am wearing cost about thirty bucks, just in case you are wondering. So, we have got preachers in sneakers, and some of that's a little comical, but that just doesn't feel right. There's something messed up about that, and then we have all the way to headlines about churches that have hidden abuse of children for forty years and pretended that people who have worked at the church did not do what they actually did, and so some of that is coming to light. We could pick different stories and headlines about churches that had financial manipulation in different ways, or that the sexual abuse scandals that have been plaguing the Catholic church or the Southern Baptist Convention. That is real, and that's awful, and so what we just have to acknowledge is to be honest about the state of the church and how truly messed up it is sometimes.

In the book, "A Church called Tove," Scott McKnight and Laura Berringer, they write a book about how church could be better, and this is what they say: "The contemporary American church is wrecked with bickering and division, celebrity worship, and unaccountable leaders, false and shallow teaching, and a Christian industrial complex formed around greed and vanity." Woohoo. Yay, church, and then here is the thing, some of you may be here today, and you're like, "I honestly, I don't get this series. I do not understand why we are talking about this, and I am not quite sure. I have not really experienced that. Church has been fine. Maybe it has not been the best all the time, and I have not loved this sermon or that thing or whatever, but it has been fine." You may not have experienced church hurt, but I guarantee you, I promise you, there are people in these seats today and watching online who every Sunday come to church, and they are walking in with a limp, not because of things that have just happened in their life, but because of what has happened in the church specifically, and so we want to be honest about that, and we want to take that head-on, and we want to not throw stones at other churches and pretend that Waterstone has it all figured out. We are flawed too, and so we just want to create space for honesty about what church is. What I want to say to you today is if you are in that space where you have experienced church hurt or you have experienced spiritual abuse in some sort of way, or maybe just even the headlines that you've been seeing the last few years have left you disillusioned with church, here's the reality. If you walked in today wondering, "I wonder what they are going to talk about," or "I wonder why we bother with church," if you have ever thought any of that, you are not alone. I promise you again that there are other people who have asked that same question. I have asked that question, and I'm a pastor who works in the church.

After college, there was this season of my life where I was working in the church in the Dallas area, and I was an intern in a youth ministry, and this church was in one of the wealthiest areas in the entire nation. For some of you, I have shared this story with you before, but Troy Aikman and Michael Jordan have homes in this community. Everybody has money. In fact, on my first Sunday at this church, I was talking to a student. He was sixteen years old and had just gotten his license. I was like, "How is it going? How is driving?" and he was like, "I just totaled my Hummer that my parents just bought me this week," so he had had his license for less than a month and had already been bought a Hummer, which is not a cheap car. He had totaled it, and then as he is telling me all this, and I am just shocked, he pulls out keys, and he starts to jingle them with this mischievous grin. He is like, "But it's okay, because my parents bought me a Lexus," and I was like, "What is this place like? Where am I right now?" It was so crazy. It was just this bizarre community that was so foreign to anything I'd ever experienced, and in that space, I just began to see things that caused me to feel a little disillusioned with church. There are good people at that church, and I am not trying to disparage them, but I began to feel for the first time in my life this

disillusionment with, “Why bother with church? What is church? Why is everyone so apathetic and living in so much sin and not caring about other people?” and I just began to struggle.

To make matters worse, later that summer we were doing a church camp with five-hundred students from that church, and we were putting the cost all on ourselves, and it happened to fall on the Fourth of July weekend, and so the leadership team decided that it was really important while we were at camp, we gave the kids a fireworks show for the Fourth of July, and they spent \$25,000 on a fireworks show. Yeah, that is the right reaction, okay? Some of you are like, “That is awesome. I love blowing stuff up.” No, no, no, a church should not spend \$25,000 on fireworks for kids at a camp, and to make all of that so much worse, that in a vacuum would have been tough for me to swallow, but at the same time I was working part-time at this church, I was also working at a boys and girls club in downtown Dallas, and as I was in this place, I was working with families who had nothing. I mean nothing, and I could not reconcile spending the \$25,000 on fireworks and giving kids a snack because they had not eaten all day in the summertime, and I did not know how to reconcile those two things, because here is the thing. The boys and girls club was about five miles from the church I was working in, and so it was literally like, “Where is the church in loving their neighbors in this place?” I did not know how to reconcile a kid who gets a Hummer and a Lexus and the family that I have to stay with at the school until 10:30 at night because their mom, who is working three different jobs, her car breaks down, and she was supposed to pick them up at 5:00 p.m. and couldn’t get there. I just did not know how to reconcile those two things, and so it left me in a place where I honestly just struggled, and I said, “Why bother with church? What is the purpose of church?” to the point when after I left those two jobs and with my family moved to Denver, I never wanted to work in the church again. I just was in this place where I thought, “There is nothing good here. I do not know how to reconcile and redeem or see what God is doing, because the church is not being what it is supposed to be,” so if you are here, and you are asking the question, “Why bother with church?” I have asked that question too, and it is not a small question.

That is a very deep question that can lead to a lot of hurt and confusion, because what we have to be really honest about is that there are some days where the church just sucks, and I do not know if I am allowed to say that word, but Larry is not here yet, so you can just e-mail him if that upsets you, okay? He gets back this week, so you can tell on me. It does, though. On its best days, the church is really messy, and on its worst days, there is something far more sinister that can happen, and so the question is, in that space, why do we continually show up and deal with church? Why do we bother with church?

So, what I want to say is this whole series is really starting today with this idea that we want to be honest about the reality of church hurt, so that we can experience hopefully some sort of potential healing for those of us who have been wounded or disillusioned with the church, and also so that we can maybe point to a hope of what the church can be, with full acknowledgement that Waterstone is not there yet. I think that is why it is sometimes hard for churches to talk about this, because it requires admitting that we as a body and a community and as a leadership are not perfect, and that we are going to make mistakes. You need to know at the start of this series, there have been people who have left Waterstone because they have felt hurt by the church. That is just a reality of church, and we need to be honest about that and be honest about the hope and healing that can take place, so that it can hopefully point us to something better.

Here is the real truth, that unfortunately, church hurt is not a new phenomenon. In fact, there are a ton of passages in scripture that you could point to that talk about church hurt, religious abuse, different ways that people have interacted with the marginalized, or even this passage from Ezekiel 34 in the Old Testament.

Ezekiel was someone who was training to be a priest and then received a call from God to be a prophet to begin calling out the very religious establishment that he had trained his whole life to participate in. That is a really fascinating scenario. That is all thanks to Josh, who just wrote a seminary paper on Ezekiel, so you can give him credit for that, but in Ezekiel 34, it says this, “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 for yourselves. Should shepherds not take care of the flock? You eat the curds, you clothe yourself with the wool, and you 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 lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.’”””

Now as we look at this text, it is not that God is just angry at literal shepherds who are not taking care of the sheep they are supposed to. This whole passage is a metaphor for the religious and political leaders of Israel, who God had entrusted his people with the flock of Israel, to take care of them, and they had neglected their responsibility, and not just neglected their responsibility, but they were abusing the sheep. He says that you are treating them brutally. You are taking advantage of them. You are trying to gain and profit off of them, rather than protecting them. One of the things that we have seen, this is all the way in the Old Testament, and we could point at so many stories after that to this day about the same scenario that plays out, and this is the point we have to take away first as we start this conversation. It is that church hurt, and really, I almost hesitate to say this, but church hurt is inevitable on some level, and that is just the truth. I hesitate to say that, because I do not want it to sound trite. I do not want it to sound dismissive of what happens in churches, but the reality is, if we choose to be in the community of church, really, any community, at some point, we will experience hurt, because church hurt is inevitable.

If you participate in this body here at Waterstone, and you may be really new to our community, and you are in that honeymoon phase, where it is like, “Oh, this is all awesome,” you at some point will probably be hurt in this community, and that could look like a lot of different things. That might look like joining a small group that does not work out. That could look like walking through the lobby on a Sunday, and someone says something about your outfit that makes you feel uncomfortable and makes you feel hurt. It could be everything in between. It could be the moments when church just disappoints you and does not meet your expectations. It could be the pastor who says a joke from the stage that lands wrong and was insensitive, and so you just feel like, “Man, I don’t know if this is the place for me.” Church hurt happens. I know that I have said things that have hurt people, maybe even unintentionally, but still have caused hurt, and so we have to be honest about that reality, that church hurt is inevitable, but at the same time, church hurt is different than spiritual abuse or religious abuse, and we want to define that term very carefully, because there are times when we experience community, and it is a natural part of being in community with fallen people that we experience hurt, but that is the messy part of church.

The sinister part of church is that sometimes religious establishments or pastors or leaders or people in the church abuse the authority that God has given them. That is what is going on in this passage, and if that term is new to you, spiritual abuse, here is a working definition for you. Spiritual abuse is a distortion and exploitation of spiritual authority to manipulate, control, use, or harm others, mostly through shame and fear. Now I know even as I just read that definition, there are some of you who are like, “Oh yeah, that shame, that fear, I have been in that seat. I have experienced that, where someone said something over me that put me in that place.”

Spiritual abuse includes intolerance for questions and doubts, using the Bible to arouse fear, rigid us-versus-them binaries, and leaders who demand unwavering loyalty, often threatening anyone who does not comply with being cut off from the community of God. Some of you have experienced church hurt, and you have received the scratches of being in community, and sometimes those scratches have bled, and for some of you that has even led to scars, but there are others of you in this room for whom it has not just been scratches and scars. It has been amputations, being in the church. You have been abused and hurt very deeply. Someone who you looked to as a spiritual authority, someone who was supposed to protect you and care for you like the shepherds of Israel, misused that authority in an abusive or manipulative way, and that is a reality of something that happens in church. What I want to say is you have experienced what sociologists and psychologists call religious trauma, and what they have found is that just the way that someone who goes to war experiences a traumatic response, and that resides in their psyche, in their body, or someone who maybe has experienced developmental trauma in their life, religious trauma is the exact same thing. The origin is different, but the result is the exact same as some of those places, so we are talking about something that is very, very real, and it is not something to just dismiss.

For those of you that as I am reading that definition, you are like, “Yeah, that is part of my story. I have been there,” what I really want to say to you today, whether you are here in the room or joining us online, is that I bleed for you. Those are the people, I am not kidding, that have my utmost respect, because church is something we all choose to do. No one is forcing you to be here. Well, I hope not. That would be terrible, but this is a choice, but there are some of you for whom choosing to show up here has a much, much deeper cost. Every time you walk through those doors, it is like a weight on your shoulders, and you deserve our respect, our thanks, and our gratitude, for continuing to show up in places and spaces where you have experienced trauma. You also need to be given permission so that sometimes it is okay to take a Sunday off if you are in a bad spot. That is all right too, but it is a real thing to choose to participate in the body of Christ when you have felt that level of abuse and hurt.

That is why it is not enough to just say that church hurt is inevitable. We also have to follow up that statement by immediately saying that spiritual abuse is unacceptable to God. Some of you who have experienced the worst of religious trauma and spiritual abuse, what you need to hear is that it is wrong and that it is evil and that it was unacceptable. Look at God’s response in Ezekiel 34. He has called out the shepherds, and He says that He has named all of the things they have done, and this is what He says to the shepherds after naming all of the things that they have committed, all of the abuse, all of the atrocities, and all of the things that have been done in his name. He says this in verse ten: “This is what the Lord says. ‘I am 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.’”

What we have to acknowledge and see in this text is that God is really angry. He is ticked about what He sees going on. He sees the abuse. He sees the way that his sheep are being mistreated. He names that, and then He begins to say, “I am against that. I am against those people who are committing those things. I will hold them accountable. I will rescue my sheep from the abusive shepherds.” God takes this so seriously. There is such a high standard for people who are in spiritual authority, people like me who get to sit on a stage and talk to hundreds of people every week about who God is. There is such a high standard that God has for those people, and what God is saying here is He does not care who they are or how powerful they are or what their salary is, or how big their church is. He will not hesitate to remove people who are evil and perpetuating evil and oppression and mistreating the flock.

God has no problem calling that out and making something happen about it, because they have betrayed God's sacred trust. Then there is a deeper level, and I know some of this may be a little more explanatory than we often are. I think it is really important to just name some of these pieces and get them right as we start this series, but one thing I want to name and explain a little further is sometimes religious trauma or spiritual abuse happens because of a relationship. People hurt us, and people say things that, like, I have a couple of friends who have been experiencing some health issues and some mental health issues, and it is shocking to me that in these different religious communities they are a part of, how many people have told them that their mental health or physical health issues are a result of demon possession. That is just straight out of the gate. Someone is like, "I am struggling, and I have anxiety," and it is like, "Oh, yeah, you are demon-possessed." What is that? These are some of the most godly people that I know. These are the people that I go to and say, "Can you pray for me? I need you to seek the Lord on my behalf," and people are just like judgmental. That is relational hurt.

That sometimes happens, and then there are other times when abuse happens in a more systemic or structural way. Churches make decisions or do things as a body that hurt and affect the community, and it is a result of the structure that they have, potentially, but there is also a deeper one that I want to camp on a little longer, and that is the idea of theological spiritual abuse, because there are, sometimes it is not a person, and it is not even necessarily a community that has left people harmed. It is what the church has believed and how the church has held those beliefs. Sometimes the hurt happens in a purely theological sense, where spiritual abuse is not limited to people, but it directly flows out of our theology.

So, here are a couple of examples of this idea. If you are my age, forty or under, I am guessing if you grew up in the church, you are probably familiar with the term "purity culture." We have talked about this before, and some of you who may be older than that, just the Lord bless you. You never had to grow up with purity culture. That is amazing. There were things about this theology of purity culture that were well intended. The Bible talks about being pure, and so the whole premise was how do we help our children grow up in a sexually liberated culture while still remaining pure? That heart is good and right, but some of the unintended theological consequences that flowed out of that belief, not even ill intended, had some drastic consequences.

There is a whole generation of women who grew up in the church that have shame and fear about their bodies and their sexuality, because they were essentially told from the time that they were eleven that how they dressed and how they acted, that they were responsible for the responses of the men in their life who were forty or fifty or whatever. Putting that on a child to say how you dress, how you act is you are responsible for how this grown adult male interacts with you, that is evil. That theology has real consequences, and beyond that, there is something about theological belief that can infect communities sometimes, where church is supposed to be the place where everyone is welcome, and some of you grew up hearing that everyone is welcome at church. You are welcome no matter what you struggle with, no matter what your difficulty is, no matter what you are dealing with. Church is the place where you can come, and you are welcome, only to find out that all our welcomes have huge caveats. They are like, "Oh wait, you think that about the Bible now? Well, sorry. You're actually not welcome here," or, "You have made that choice or are struggling in that particular way? Sorry, that is a no-go for us. You have doubts? Oh, man, yeah, you probably are not even a believer. You are not even a follower of Jesus if you have doubts. You are not," and some of you have grown up where the church that said it was supposed to be the most welcoming place actually became the place where you experienced the deepest rejection.

It goes so much deeper than that, because if the community of God that was supposed to be the hands and feet of Jesus, if they rejected you, then maybe it is not just they who are rejecting you. Maybe God himself was rejecting you, and so now, as an adult, you are not even sure what it means when a pastor says, “God loves you,” because there have always been conditions on that idea that you have experienced, but that is a real thing that people who are sitting in this room have experienced. Sometimes our theology has really, really difficult consequences, and we have to be honest about that.

Here is the reason why church hurt hurts so bad. It is because church is supposed to be the place where we as a collective community are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus. I want you to think about that phrase, the hands and feet of Jesus. When you think about Jesus’ hands and feet when He was alive and walking through this world, what did He do? I mean, everywhere He walked, everywhere He used his feet, He went to people who were marginalized, whom the religious elites had chastised or ostracized. He went to the places where no one else was willing to go, and then when He arrived in those places, He used his hands to bind the broken, to heal those who were hurting, to offer comfort and compassion for those who felt marginalized. That was what his hands and feet did, and if the church is supposed to resemble that, and yet church somehow becomes the place not where we are healed or our wounds are bound, but the place that we actually experience deep brokenness and hurt, and sometimes even abuse, then it is that juxtaposition that we do not know how to reconcile. That is why all of this can hurt so deeply. Some of you have stories of deep hurt with church and, and that is really what it comes down to is the people who were supposed to be the ones that protected and healed and offered hope were the ones who inflicted the most pain and harm and abuse, and so what do we do with that? If we want to be honest about that reality, what do we do with that? What does God have to say about that?

As we close our time today, what I want to do is just pull a couple of application pieces from this Ezekiel 34 passage, because I think what we see in this passage is God’s response to all of the things that we have been talking about, and I think when we see God’s response to these sorts of things, then it gives us a direction or a path to follow for how we should respond in those same situations. So, God’s first response that we see in this passage, God’s response to spiritual abuse, is He acknowledges the abuse. Do you know there are seven verses that were read today at the very beginning of the passage where God is just listing out all of the things, every single thing that the people are doing, that the shepherds are doing to abuse and mistreat the flock? God does not deny it. He does not defend the shepherds. He does not say, “Oh yeah, they had a bad day, and so it is okay.” He does not make the sheep sign a non-disclosure agreement to silence them about what happened, like the churches that have done that. God does not say, “These are my representatives, and if we call that out, then how will I look, and what will people think about me?” God does not do any of that. He acknowledges every single wound. He is honest about what had happened, and if God acknowledges what goes wrong in his community, then how dare we pretend like we can’t be honest what is happening in our own? We have to have a different posture, where we can be honest about what has happened in our faith communities, and we have to commit as a community not to hide things.

I realize even saying that might feel weird, because most of that burden probably falls on people like me and Larry and the people on our leadership team, our elders, but what I need you to hear is that that is something we have to be committed to, in order to care for the flock that God has entrusted to us, but there is also an application for you in the room too, because there are some people here, as I have been talking through this all day, you are like, “Paul, I really don’t get it. Like, usually you are fine, but today, like, man, I really, it doesn’t make any sense to me. I don’t understand this conversation about church



hurt,” and here is why this is important to you. It is that you are listening into a conversation because there are people in this room, people you know, this is their reality, and part of your role in the body of Christ is to also acknowledge and make space for people who are hurting. Sometimes what happens, especially if it is in a place we love or maybe about a pastor that we really care about, is that when someone starts saying, “Yeah, this really hurt,” our immediate response is to defend that place or to say like, “No, you do not understand,” and what we have to understand about this conversation about church hurt and spiritual abuse is it always starts with acknowledging the pain and the reality of what community can do. We have to be willing to acknowledge those ideas.

This is so important. It does not matter if a church or a ministry has positively impacted thousands of people. It does not nullify the negative side of some of the things that still happen in that community. It does not take away the church hurt. I think Waterstone is a beautiful church. There are still people who have been hurt here, and all of the positive things that we could point to as a community and say, “Yeah, but we’re a good church,” none of that negates the people who have left here hurting or wounded or continue to show up who are hurting and wounded. We have to acknowledge that while we say no church is perfect, and Waterstone is not perfect, that is not enough. We have to actually acknowledge the pain and heartache, and that is what God does, and that is supposed to be our response.

Not only does God acknowledge the abuse, but also does He express anger. God’s response to the shepherds who are mistreating and abusing the flock, his response to them is anger, and He comes towards them with justice and accountability. He says, “I will remove you. I will protect my flock.” What we have to understand is that when manipulation and abuse happen, God says that cannot stand. I think one of the things we are experiencing in our current cultural moment as we see all of these different headlines of all of these people who for forty years had faithful ministries, we assumed, and then suddenly things are coming to light about the ways that they treated women or children, or the ways that they laundered money or bought jets or really fancy shoes or whatever it might be. It is this reckoning that is taking place. God is refining and reforming his church. He is saying, “This cannot stand. This is my bride, and she is not to be sold or manipulated or mistreated,” and God is protecting the flock. He is raising up voices to call out people who are abusing and mistreating the flock. God is angry, and what you need to hear is if this is part of your story, God has seen what has happened to you, and He did not just shrug his shoulders and say, “Well, that happens in my church.” God is angry about what has happened to you, and whether it is in this life or the next, God will bring accountability to what has happened.

That is the third thing we see in this passage. It is that God just not just shrug his shoulders, but God has accountability for the abusers. He tells Ezekiel that not only has He seen what has happened, but also do his compassion and his anger move him to action. He will protect his flock, and what you need to hear, and what I hope you hear most from our conversation today is this: God deeply cares about how his sheep are shepherded. He deeply cares about how the sheep in his flocks are shepherded, and his heart is that the church and the community would be a place that people are shepherded and cared for well. I get that this might feel a bit weird too, because again, a lot of that follows, but there is an expectation that we as a community care for the hurting sheep amongst us, that we make space and acknowledge, that we may be the voice that calls out when something happened that was not supposed to.

So, given all that, why am I sitting up here? Why are we doing this series? Why am I talking to you about why we should still bother with church? I mean, a \$25,000 fireworks show, like that would be enough for me. “Yeah, maybe we should rethink things,” and we should, but why am I still here, and why do I, honestly, still believe in the church?

I am not going to answer that question fully, and that is not supposed to be like, “Hey, this is me, and so I hope it is true for you too,” but what I have found in the moments when I am most ready to walk away and say like, “Yeah, this, why bother? This church is a mess,” in those moments, these words from Rachel and Evan have been really helpful for me, and I want to share them with you, because yeah, I will just read them.

“This is the church. Here she is lovely, irregular, sometimes sick, and sometimes well. This is the body like no other, that God has shaped and placed in the world. Jesus lives here. This is his soul’s address. There is a lot to be thankful for. All things considered, she has taken a beating, the church. Every day she meets the gates of hell, and she prevails. Every day she serves, stumbles, injures, and repairs. That she is healed is an underrated miracle. That she gives birth is beyond reckoning. Maybe it is time to make peace with her, and maybe it is time to embrace her, flawed as she is.” Those are the words that sometimes call me back from those moments where like, “Man, this is too much. I don’t understand it. I don’t,” because this is where we find Jesus, and I do not quite understand the mystery in that. I don’t understand why Jesus has chosen a broken yet beautiful bride, other than that this is the place that He has chosen for his Spirit, his soul, his presence to dwell, and this is the place where we find Jesus.

That is actually what Ezekiel takes us to. At the end of his passage, in verses 15 and 16, he says this: “I myself will tend to my sheep.” This is God speaking. If the flock will not be protected by the shepherds, then this is God’s response. “‘I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down,’ declares the sovereign Lord. ‘I will search for the lost. I will bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong, I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice,’” which then in the gospel of John, we actually see Jesus take up this calling.

There is this story where it is going back to Jesus having this interaction with the Pharisees, and the people who are mistreated and the people whom the shepherds of Israel are not taking care of the flock the way they are supposed to, Jesus is trying to speak to them and bring reform, and this is what he says to challenge them. “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, so when he sees a wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock, and it scatters. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep, but I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep, and my sheep know me. Just as the Father knows me, I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep.” Both Ezekiel and Jesus point to the promise of Jesus in the midst of the pain, and it is in that promise that ultimately, we see Jesus is the Good Shepherd who takes care of the sheep, and I don’t mean this at all in a trite or insincere way. Jesus is the shepherd who literally lays down his life for the sheep who have been wounded. By his stripes and his wounds, we are healed. That is the whole premise of this community, that hurt will be inevitable. Where spiritual abuse happens, it is unacceptable and has to be put to a stop, but ultimately, we are the bride, not married to each other, but married to Jesus, who for some reason calls this broken and beautiful thing that He calls his bride, and He continually chooses her again and again and again, even when she is unfaithful.

I do not think it is a mistake that on the night Jesus was betrayed, the institution of communion, Jesus begins the whole thing with this idea that the night He was betrayed, Jesus experienced betrayal from the community of people that was supposed to be most with Him. Jesus knows what it is like to walk through the doors of spiritual community and experience abuse. Do not miss that, and yet his response was on the night He was betrayed, He took bread and said, “This is my body broken for you. Take it, receive it, and eat,” and then he said, “This is the blood of my covenant poured out for you, shed for you,

and every time you do this, do this in remembrance of me.” Do this in remembrance of what I have done for my bride, as broken and as beautiful as she is. That is what communion reminds us of. Communion is the reminder that Christianity and following Jesus is not something that is simply meant to be believed, but it is meant to be lived, shared, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. So, remember that even though some of us may want to walk away, we Christians can’t be followers of Jesus on our own. We need the community, and we need the communion of Jesus, and so as we come to the table today to receive communion, I want to pray over those of you in the room who may have experienced abuse or church hurt in some of the ways that I have talked about. I do not know all of your stories, but I know enough of them to know this is a reality in this community, and I just want to say a prayer for hope and healing and honesty as we come to the table today, so would you please join me in prayer before we partake in the Lord’s Supper together?

Heavenly Father, God, we come to you today with the full acknowledgement that the church is a place of brokenness and woundedness and hurt. God, some days it is just simply messy, and other days, as we said, there is something far more sinister, but God, I pray specifically for those in the room today, or those who are joining us from home, God, for those who have walked through these doors with a limp today, who have experienced the worst side of what church can be and what it can do, the people who may have trusted someone in spiritual authority over them who manipulated or abused or assaulted them, God, the places where the church has broken trust, the places where the church has not lived up to who you have called it to be, and I pray that even this time we have had together today, the place of honesty could begin the possible path of hope and healing. God, I pray that even as we just enter into this series, that there would be places where we as a community learn we have to do better and what it means to be your bride and the and followers of you. God, we acknowledge the hurt, and we ask that you would do only what your Spirit could do to bring reconciliation and healing and hope in the midst of the brokenness. As we come to the table today, we are reminded that Jesus himself was betrayed and broken for us. May the receiving of communion today remind us of that story and anchor us in that truth, and it is in Christ’s name that we pray, amen.

47:45 minutes

Edited by Tom Kenaston

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