The Word of the Lord from Ezekiel 34: “As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out My sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.” This is the Word of the Lord: thanks be to God.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. The Weather Report in Ezekiel 34

It will happen on a day of clouds and thick darkness. That’s when the Lord will rescue them. In the midst of this prophecy in our Old Testament lesson, we get a weather report.

“Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for My sheep and will seek them out.” Then He says how He’ll go about it. He’ll rescue them from everywhere that they’ve been scattered. He’ll bring them out from all peoples and gather them from all countries, and He’ll bring them back to their land. He will feed them; and wherever they are in the land, He will provide rich grazing land. And then comes the kicker: God says, “I Myself will be the shepherd of My sheep, and I Myself will make them lie down. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.” He won’t be sending someone else to do the gathering: the Lord says that He’ll do it Himself.

The first half of our Old Testament lesson is chock full of comfort for those who have ears to hear, and ears that hear will welcome the message. This is late in the life of Old Testament Israel. The northern ten tribes are long gone, decimated by the Assyrians over a hundred years before. For the remnant of Judah to the south, it’s looking grim: the Babylonians are hungry to conquer, and there’s nothing to stop them. The Lord has already declared that Jerusalem will fall. They will be taken captive and scattered among the nations. But in that horrible time of waiting, the Lord promises He’ll seek His people out like lost sheep and bring them back.

Why is this to befall Jerusalem? The Lord continues His illustration of the sheep. He says,

Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

The Lord has provided every good gift to His people, be it the Promised Land or abundant food or protection or whatever. More than that, He’s given them His Word and His promise that He favors them. But rather than make good use of all that He gives, the strong sheep have misused and abused them. You can read about it in Ezekiel and elsewhere. They’ve forsaken the Word. They’ve cheated one another and taken advantage of the poor and lowly. They’ve turned to immorality and false gods. As the strong sheep—the leaders—go, the masses follow; and when the nation falls in judgment, the remnant of faithful believers will be taken captive too. They will suffer in this world because of others; but Babylonia is not the end for them. This world is not their home, and the Lord has a better, eternal land for them. “I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered,” declares the Lord. Then He gives
you the weather report: “I will rescue them...on a day of clouds and thick darkness.”

It’s not really a weather report: it’s a key phrase. Days of “clouds and thick darkness” are only mentioned this way five times in the Old Testament, and they always have something in common: they mark the Day of the Lord. They are signs that the Lord is present. For instance, at Mt. Sinai when the Lord descends to give the Ten Commandments, Moses describes the mountain as wrapped in clouds and thick darkness. Where you find clouds and thick darkness in the Old Testament, you find God. It is so in Psalm 97:2 where clouds of thick darkness surround Him, and it is so in Joel 2:2 and Zephaniah 1:15 as those prophets declare the coming day of the Lord.

It might strike you as strange: when we think of the Lord appearing, we normally think of light and glory, not clouds and gloom. But the clouds and darkness are important signs: they mean that the Lord is present in holiness to judge. He is there to separate the righteous from the unrighteous, the sheep from the predator, His people from His enemies.

So it is at Mt. Sinai, where He declares His holy Law.

So it is here in Ezekiel, where He comes to rescue His downtrodden sheep and destroy the fat, strong sheep that have preyed upon them.

So it will be on the Last Day, as proclaimed by Joel and Zephaniah, when He comes to judge the nations, deliver His people and cast His enemies away.

And so it is in our Gospel lesson, from Luke 15.

II. Cloudy, Dark Days in the Gospel of Luke

We don’t know if there are clear skies in our Gospel lesson or not, but we do know this: the Lord is there. He is there in the flesh, and He is doing exactly what He said He would be doing back in Ezekiel 34. He is gathering His sheep, so that He might feed them and give them life. He is also warning the fat and the strong sheep that they are facing destruction.

Jesus is eating with sinners. Everyone’s a sinner, of course, but these people are called sinners because they make no pretense at trying to keep the laws of the Pharisees. They’re lost sheep, strayed and wandered. They’re injured and weak, and there is an advantage to being injured and weak: those who are injured and weak know that they need help. Sheep who know they are lost are going to be happier when the Shepherd shows up. Sinners who know they’re sinful are the ones more likely to know they need a Savior. So Jesus is eating with them: the Good Shepherd has come to gather them in. By His Word, He is bringing them to repentance. He is forgiving their sins. He is telling them that the kingdom of heaven is theirs, because God loves a broken and contrite heart that looks to Him for mercy.

The Pharisees don’t like this one bit. The fat, strong sheep can’t figure out why the Shepherd is eating with sinners, and so they’d really like Him to go away. Just think: it’s never a good thing for sheep for the shepherd to go away, because they’re defenseless against those who would destroy them. But the Pharisees want Him gone: being fat, strong sheep at the moment, they don’t see the need for Jesus. Because they don’t know how weak and injured and dying they are because of sin, they see no need for His grace and salvation.

They don’t just dismiss Jesus: by what they believe and do, they oppose Him. They’ve taken the Scriptures and distorted them to teach that you can save yourself: they’ve trampled the grass and muddied the water for all the other sheep, too, and they’re leading many astray.
So Jesus tells them this parable:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Let's be sure to get this right. In truth, all 100 sheep are lost, but there is only one who knows it. That's the one the shepherd goes after: he leaves the 99 because they don't want him anyway. So Jesus is going after the lost sheep—the sinners who know their need for grace. He's leaving behind the Pharisees who do not want Him, in hopes that they repent and see their need for Him. He wants the 99 sheep to understand that they are the one, and He wants to gather the one who repents and receives the shepherd.

The Pharisees see no need for repentance, and so they grumble that Jesus leaves them and goes after the lost sheep. You know what, though? Heaven rejoices over the one. Heaven rejoices over the one who repents, because of one more dark and gloomy day.

You find it in Luke 23:44-45: “It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed.” It’s another text where God is present on earth. He’s nailed to a cross as rebellious sheep put the Shepherd to death. True to the darkness and gloom, He is there for judgment: not to judge sinners for their sin, but to suffer their judgment for them.

On the cross, the Good Shepherd is sacrificed as the blemish-free Passover Lamb.

And on the cross, He is destroyed like the rebellious sheep of Ezekiel 34. Destroyed for the rebellious sheep, so that they might repent and be restored.

He’s on the cross for you. The shepherd who will come to judge first suffers your judgment so that you don’t have to:

All those times you trample the good grazing and muddy the water, all those times that you ignore or obscure God’s Word to pursue those convenient sins you want to do—it’s all on Him at the cross.

All the times you trample on others to get your way—on Him at Calvary.

All the times that you blame Him for your frailty, your weakness and your straying is on Him—on Him.

The Lord is there on that dark and gloomy day for judgment—and so He is judged for your sin and suffers your sentence there. Endures your hell. Dies your death.

He dies for you and rises again because the Last Day, Judgment Day is coming. To all who have not repented of their sin, who have said, “I don’t want or need this Jesus or His grace,” He will say, “Depart from Me.” What is even more tragic is that the Christ so desires not to say those words that He’s already suffered that departure for them: He’s sentenced Himself and served it out for their sin already, and they’ve elected to do the time—the eternity—for themselves.
That judgment is real. So is Christ’s sacrifice. His kindness, then, leads you to repentance. You examine yourself and you know that you are far from holy. So you repent: you confess your sins, because you trust that Jesus has died for them. And so He has! And because He has, heaven rejoices in your repentance, for it gives glory to the One who died and rose for you.

That day will be the last one of clouds and thick darkness for you: after that, only the eternal day of God’s glory and presence in heaven. You know this to be true because the Lord promises you, His elect:

As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so I have sought you out and made you My own. I will rescue you from all places where you have been scattered. I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the countries, and will bring you into your own land. And I will feed you with good pasture. I Myself will be your Shepherd. I will seek you who are lost, and I will bring back you who have strayed, and I will bind up you who are injured, and I will strengthen you who are weak, and the fat and the strong who do not repent I will destroy. I will feed you in justice.

This promise is for you, because the Lord in His justice and mercy declares this to you for the sake of His Son: you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen