

EZEKIEL

Hard to Heart

"Sheepwrecked"

34:1-31

Sheep are the most frequently mentioned animal in the Bible, and those who care for them, the shepherds, appear in approximately one hundred Bible passages.

Many of the most prominent people in the Old Testament were shepherds - Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David, and Amos.

Both Moses and David were men whose shepherding skills were honed in the wilderness on sheep so they could properly care for, 'shepherd,' if you will, God's people.

The metaphor of being a shepherd to God's people is used in the New Testament as well.

Ezekiel thirty-four is all about shepherding. The Lord will compare the leaders of Israel to false, cruel shepherds who put their own needs ahead of His people. Then God will introduce the true shepherd of Israel to be revealed in the last days.

Ezekiel 34:1 And the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

Ezekiel 34:2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?"

Ezekiel 34:3 You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock.

Ezekiel 34:4 The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.

From our brief survey of the Old Testament a moment ago you see that shepherding was held in high regard by the Jews. It would not be offensive at all to say that the citizens were as sheep and the leaders, both civil and religious, were their shepherds.

God thus compared the actions of Israel's leaders to those of the worst shepherds.

I was thinking of those hidden camera reveals, like when you think the babysitter is doing something weird. Then you watch as she brutalizes your child.

God was exposing the leaders for all to see their true character.

Ezekiel 34:5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered.

Ezekiel 34:6 My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them."

On at least two occasions we've had dogs we loved get lost. One broke through a fence while friends were watching him. We eventually found him in the pound. You could tell his time out in the world was pretty rough!

With the Babylonian captivity upon them, the dispersion of Jews around the world for centuries had begun.

Ezekiel 34:7 'Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord:

Ezekiel 34:8 "As I live," says the Lord God, "surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock became food for every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock" -

Ezekiel 34:9 therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord!

Ezekiel 34:10 Thus says the Lord God: "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds shall feed themselves no more; for I will deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them."

This is what God had already done as Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar. But it is also a universal decree of how God eventually deals with selfish shepherds who prey upon His precious saints.

Looking at this from our perspective, from the use of the metaphor in the New Testament, we find a greater emphasis (I think) on the role of feeding the flock of God.

Peter draws this out in a couple of ways:

1. First, in Jesus' post-resurrection talk with Peter on the beach over breakfast, the Lord told Peter, "feed My lambs" and "feed My sheep."
2. Peter picked-up on this and in his own writings said, "Feed the flock of God which is among you..." (1Peter 5:2 KJV).

The word for "feed" in the First Peter passage can be translated, "shepherd," and thus encompass much more than teaching the Word of God. Peter himself interpreted it to have primary application to the study and teaching of the Bible. When confronted, in the Book of Acts, with the needs of the neglected widows, Peter uttered his famous phrase, "It is not desirable that we should leave the Word of God... we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word."

Paul also made it clear, in Ephesians, that the leaders have a primary responsibility to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry by teaching the Bible to them.

This sometimes comes across as if the pastor is "too good" to do certain things. I see it more as setting Christians free to minister in the ways God has gifted them.

God next began to speak of Himself as their Shepherd.

Ezekiel 34:11 'For thus says the Lord God: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.

Ezekiel 34:12 As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day.

Ezekiel 34:13 And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country.

Ezekiel 34:14 I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

Ezekiel 34:15 I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down," says the Lord God.

Ezekiel 34:16 "I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment."

I take these verses to relate mostly to what God will do in the future Millennial Kingdom on the earth that Jesus will establish at His Second Coming.

The present gathering of Israel to her ancient homeland, and the arrival everyday of new Jews from all over the earth, is obviously a necessary precursor to the Last Days events that will eventually bring Jesus back to the earth.

We can learn something about 'good shepherding' by listing the "I will's" in this section.

"I will bring them out." It reminds us all that nonbelievers need to be brought out from the world, from the darkness, and into God's light of salvation. Good shepherding begins with sharing the Good News.

"I will feed them" speaks of the need to keep the Bible foundational. We must defend the authority of Scripture. More than that, we must believe it is all we need for life and godliness as we teach it to others.

"I will seek what was lost (etc.)" speaks, to us by way of application, of going after those who have wandered away, with the goal of restoring them.

"I will destroy the fat and the strong" is a warning that we not prey upon God's people for our own personal interests or gain.

Ezekiel 34:17 'And as for you, O My flock, thus says the Lord God: "Behold, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats.

Ezekiel 34:18 Is it too little for you to have eaten up the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture - and to have drunk of the clear waters, that you must foul the residue with your feet?

Ezekiel 34:19 And as for My flock, they eat what you have trampled with your feet, and they drink what you have fouled with your feet."

Ezekiel 34:20 'Therefore thus says the Lord God to them: "Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat and the lean sheep.

Ezekiel 34:21 Because you have pushed with side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad,

Ezekiel 34:22 therefore I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

This is reminiscent of the famous sheep and goat judgment we read about in Matthew 25. It occurs at the Second Coming of Jesus to the earth, in the waning hours of the Great Tribulation.

The lean sheep are those saved individuals who survive the terrible persecutions of those days. They enter in their normal human bodies into the Millennial Kingdom.

The fat sheep here would refer to nonbelievers, those who had persecuted the believers. They are sent away to await final judgment after the Millennial Kingdom.

Why "sheep and sheep" and not "sheep and goats"? Remember, these are metaphors. Here in Ezekiel God is staying true to the overall metaphor of shepherd and sheep. There's been no mention of goats; it would be weird here.

In Matthew twenty-five, Jesus is describing the same end-of-the-Tribulation event, but He utilizes a more stark comparison.

Ezekiel 34:23 I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them - My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd.

Ezekiel 34:24 And I, the Lord, will be their God, and My servant David a prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

David was long dead. So is God talking about David being resurrected and serving as king in the Millennium? Or is this a reference to the promises that David's son, Jesus, would be King?

The fact that Jesus Christ will reign over the earth is imbedded in practically every prophecy concerning the millennial kingdom. The absolute character of His reign is indicated in Isaiah 11:3-5. This central prophecy is confirmed by the angel to Mary in announcing the coming birth of Christ in these words: "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:32-33).

Still, there are references to David as king in the Millennium.

Here is a quote that offers a probable solution:

... in keeping with the prophetic references throughout Scripture, namely, that by David is meant the resurrected David who shares with Christ as prince some of the governmental duties of the millennial kingdom. It should be clear from many Scriptures that the reign of Christ is shared with others. As William Newell has written: "David is not the son of David. Christ, as Son of David, will be King; and David, His father after the flesh, will be prince, during the Millennium" (William R. Newell, *The Revelation*, p. 323). In the light of many prophecies which promise saints the privilege of reigning with Christ, it would seem most logical that David the king raised from the dead should be given a place of prominence in the Davidic kingdom of the millennial reign of Christ. As indicated in Revelation 19:16, Christ is "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." This would certainly imply other rulers (cf. Isa 32:1; Ezek 45:8-9; Matt 19:28; Luke 19:12-27).

So in the end context decides if the reference is to David or to the greater Son of David, Jesus Christ.

The remaining verses are clearly Millennial.

Ezekiel 34:25 "I will make a covenant of peace with them, and cause wild beasts to cease from the land; and they will dwell safely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods.

Ezekiel 34:26 I will make them and the places all around My hill a blessing; and I will cause showers to come down in their season; there shall be showers of blessing.

Ezekiel 34:27 Then the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield her increase. They shall be safe in their land; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I have broken the bands of their yoke and delivered them from the hand of those who enslaved them.

Ezekiel 34:28 And they shall no longer be a prey for the nations, nor shall beasts of the land devour them; but they shall dwell safely, and no one shall make them afraid.

Ezekiel 34:29 I will raise up for them a garden of renown, and they shall no longer be consumed with hunger in the land, nor bear the shame of the Gentiles anymore.

This predicts and promises that Israel will be restored and more. God will rule and reign the Millennial earth from a fruitful, beautiful Israel. The times of the Gentiles will be over. Instead of persecuting Jews, Gentiles will be drawn to Israel to worship God.

The thing that most characterizes the Millennium, at least according to these verses, is "peace." The world will finally be at peace. Even animals and humans will be at peace with one another.

As we like to say, There can be no lasting peace until the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, returns.

Ezekiel 34:30 Thus they shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and they, the house of Israel, are My people," says the Lord God.' "

Ezekiel 34:31 "You are My flock, the flock of My pasture; you are men, and I am your God," says the Lord God.

God comes out of the metaphor to simply say, "You are men [or, My people], and I am your God."

Some of you like to restore things. Some things, when restored, are even better than they were originally.

God is going to restore His people. It will be better than ever in the Millennium.

We'll be there, too, in resurrected, glorified bodies, helping to rule and reign.

Awesome!