



Strong Words for Shepherds

Ezekiel 34:1-7,11-13a, 15-16 *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 the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! 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 lost. 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 over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.*

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ...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 them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. ...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 the flock with justice."

Sometimes we Christians in general and pastors in particular are guilty of proclaiming God's truth by way of generalities. While Scripture is certainly full of propositions that apply everywhere to everyone at all times, we can end up speaking so broadly and so generally that we communicate to no one in particular. God's Word however does speak in specifics to certain people at exact times about precise circumstances. Both God's law that convicts and his gospel that comforts and restores are designed to be a sword and a scalpel that pierce the heart and bring heavenly healing to our wounds.

Like a rock between the eyes, the LORD's rebuke in Ezekiel Chapter 34 is designed to stun every shepherd of God's people--every pastor and church elder, every parent, every person to whom God has given spiritual oversight and entrusted the care of another's soul. This is not a word meant for others but for us. A sharp stinging word meant to make our ears ring and cause us to sit down and evaluate ourselves and our responsibilities.

It's no wonder that God uses the illustration of a shepherd to describe those whom he has called to spiritually care for his beloved people. The job of a shepherd is to feed and protect and lead and care for the sheep at the risk and expense and exertion of himself. In Ezekiel's day God looked at these shepherds--the priests and the prophets, the kings and the like--and he was disgusted by what he saw: instead of compassion, care, and self-sacrifice, he saw greed, selfishness, negligence, apathy, and brutality; and the results of this spiritual rot among the shepherds was catastrophic for the flock: rather than binding up broken hearts and bringing back the

wandering and gathering the people around their great and unchangeable God, the sheep were being scattered and lost and becoming easy prey for hungry wolves and wild animals, Satan and all those with him, who lick their chops at another soul's destruction. Such a sobering picture should have every shepherd examining their own hearts and motives, their priorities, their words and actions, and wherever there is selfishness, laziness, or indifference, to confess to God and repent.

But repentance not only includes an acknowledgment of sin and desire to do the opposite, it also means finding rest and the strength to change in the grace and promises of God. In this case God reminds the renegade shepherds and his scattered flock that he is our perfect Shepherd. In his compassionate power he would bring the scattered people of Israel back from their captivity in Babylon and make them a nation once more. He would see Jerusalem and its temple rebuilt. He was going to bring his people back to himself and personally care for each one of them. When we shepherds fail and when our shepherds fail us, may this be our comfort and confidence: in the LORD we have the perfect Shepherd, who loves us and cares for us and guides and leads us our whole life through. He sees our every need. He feels our every bruise. He diligently seeks us and wants us as his own, even when we have strayed and run from him. God's Son, Jesus, is our Good Shepherd, who died for us to take away our sins and rose to conquer Satan and the grave so that one day we will rest with him and with each other--one forgiven, full, secure, and perfect flock, in the open pastures and green grazing land of heaven.

Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Shepherd, thank you for loving and finding and caring for me. Renew and reinvigorate the shepherds who have charge over me and care for your church throughout the world. Give them hearts like yours and keep their energy and attention focused on your flock, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.