

Lessons in Shepherding 2: Jeremiah and Ezekiel

By Paul Alexander

[Editor's note: In the interest of providing pastors with good resources, or at least of pointing them toward good ideas, we are grateful to present Pastor Paul Alexander's elder training seminars for new elders. Alexander himself says that this study is dependent on and adapted from Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart* (IVP, 2006), and A.D. Clarke, "Leadership," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (IVP, 20--). This issue of the 9Marks eJournal presents the first half of Alexander's curriculum (classes 1 to 4), which exclusively focuses on the metaphor of shepherding in Scripture. In a future issue, we will present the latter half of his curriculum, which moves to the more practical aspects of eldering.]

We're studying the leadership metaphor of "shepherding" in the Old Testament, in part because Paul counsels the Ephesian elders to "shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Peter likewise counsels elders to "shepherd the flock of God among you" (1 Pet. 5:2).

In the former class on biblical shepherding, we studied the model shepherds of the Old Testament. God is the ultimate shepherd of his people, as we discovered in texts like Psalm 23 and Isaiah 40:11. Moses was the first paradigmatic human shepherd, through whom God shepherded his people. And David is said to be a shepherd as well.

In this class, we're going to look at a few critiques of bad shepherds from Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

JEREMIAH

The Setting—Chapter 2

Let's start in Jeremiah by reading a few passages that describe the situation of Israel in Jeremiah's day and which use the shepherd metaphor.

Thus says the LORD, "What injustice did your fathers find in Me, That they went far from Me And walked after emptiness and became empty? They did not say, 'Where is the LORD Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, Who led us through the wilderness, Through a land of deserts and of pits, Through a land of drought and of deep darkness, Through a land that no one crossed And where no man dwelt?' I brought you into the fruitful land To eat its fruit and its good things. But you came and defiled My land, And My inheritance you made an abomination. The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?' And those who handle the law did not know Me; The rulers [*roheem*, shepherds] also transgressed against Me, And the prophets prophesied by Baal And walked after things that did not profit. Therefore I will yet contend with you," declares the LORD, "And with your sons' sons I will contend" (Jer 2:5-9).

Why did the nation of Israel wander away from God and forget his great works of redemption in the past? Because their priests, rulers, and prophets had been negligent. The word for "rulers" here is "shepherds" and refers to the kings. The shepherds were partly to blame for the apostasy of the people and for the defilement of the land by their transgression of the law. Deuteronomy 17:18-20 had stipulated that the king write out for himself a copy of the law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests, and that he should read it all the days of his life. He was to do this in order to learn

how to fear the Lord and obey his statutes, and “so that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel” (Deut. 17:19b-20). Writing out God’s law was for the king’s humility, because the moment in which he became prideful, he would in the same moment disregard God’s authority over him and act as if his royal authority was inherent in himself rather than derived from God. The application for us today is pretty clear: there’s a direct relationship between our humility and how much we tie ourselves to God’s word in fulfilling our roles as elders. Moreover, our authority is wholly tied to what can be taught from his word, and not one inch beyond it.

A Promise—Chapter 3

Unfortunately, this is exactly what was happening in the days of Jeremiah. The shepherd-kings were transgressing God’s law and therefore overstepping the bounds of their own authority. In response, God promised to give his people new shepherds:

“Return, O faithless sons,” declares the LORD; “For I am a master to you, And I will take you one from a city and two from a family, And I will bring you to Zion. Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding” (Jer 3:15).

What’s true of these new shepherds?

- They are gifts from God.
- They share God’s heartfelt concern for his sheep.
- And this heartfelt concern works itself out in a carefulness to feed his sheep on the knowledge and understanding of God and his law rather than their own knowledge, or the knowledge of the pagan gods and practices of their Canaanite neighbors. Knowledge and understanding of God, his word, and his ways are nourishing and sustaining for the sheep.

Stupid Shepherds—Chapter 10

Shepherds who do not rely on God’s word, on the other hand, are just plain stupid.

For the shepherds have become stupid And have not sought the LORD; Therefore they have not prospered, And all their flock is scattered (Jer 10:21).

In the verses of chapter 10 leading up to this condemnation, Jeremiah contrasts the impotence of idols and the stupidity of their worshippers with the living creator God. The wise men of the pagan nations are stupid and foolish (Jer. 10:8) and “every man is stupid, devoid of knowledge; every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols” (Jer. 10:14). Then in verse 21, he says the shepherds of Israel are just as stupid as the pagan “wise men” because they have ignored the Word of the living God and begun to worship idols. They’ve become just like what they’ve worshipped. Instead of beholding God and becoming godly, they’ve looked at the pagan idols of the culture around them; and they’ve become stupid.

It’s worth pausing long enough to consider, what would such mimicking of culture look like today, especially among those who call themselves evangelical pastors?

Bad, Good, and Very Good—23:1-8

In the first verses of Jeremiah 23, God promises woe upon these unfaithful shepherds, and then promises to gather his flock himself with good shepherds and a Good Shepherd.

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: “You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,” declares the LORD. “Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the LORD. “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; And he will reign as king and act wisely And do justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell securely; And this is his name by which he will be called, ‘The LORD our righteousness.’ Therefore behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when they will no longer say, ‘As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt,’ but, ‘As the LORD lives, who brought up and led back the descendants of the household of Israel from the north land and from all the countries where I had driven them.’ Then they will live on their own soil” (Jer. 23:1-8).

What are these bad shepherds doing that makes them bad shepherds? They destroy the sheep (v. 1), scatter them (vv. 1, 2), let sheep go missing, expose them to danger, and generally neglect them (v.2—“have not attended to them”).

Why is neglecting and exposing sheep to danger so bad? Because sheep are dumb and careless. They need guidance.

How does God characterize this kind of neglect? It’s evil (v.2).

What is God going to do to address the situation? He’s going to bring the sheep back to their pasture, and raise up better shepherds to tend them.

What will these better shepherds do for the sheep?

- They’ll *nourish* rather than destroy them, so that they can be fruitful and multiply.
- They will *gather* them together rather than scattering them.
- They will *keep track* and account for each one of them (“nor will any be missing”).
- God will *keep them secure* in the flock rather than exposing them to danger (v.4 “they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified”; v. 6 “will dwell securely”).

These are categories for us to associate with the work of shepherding the flock – nourishing them so that they can be spiritually fruitful and multiply themselves, gathering them together into a flock, keeping track of each one of them so that none go missing, keeping them within the security of the flock with no reason for fear from wolves who would promote false teaching.

Yet what is God’s ultimate solution for his people according to verse 5? God will raise up a righteous Branch from the house of David to reign as king, act wisely, and do righteousness. The

righteous obedience and saving activity of this king is what will save the Lord's people from their sins and make them dwell securely with him as they follow his voice back to their own pasture lands.

So God will raise up multiple human shepherds to lead and feed his people. But ultimately it will be this righteous Branch of David who reigns over both the sheep and over the under-shepherds in order to establish his people in righteousness, salvation, and security. This Branch of David, of course, is Jesus Christ, the ultimate Good Shepherd in John 10, who we will look at in the next class.

Jeremiah's Lamentation—23:9-15

In the verses that follow, we hear Jeremiah's reaction to his nation's leaders. Jeremiah writes,

As for the prophets: My heart is broken within me, All my bones tremble; I have become like a drunken man, Even like a man overcome with wine, Because of the LORD And because of His holy words. For the land is full of adulterers; For the land mourns because of the curse. The pastures of the wilderness have dried up. Their course also is evil And their might is not right. "For both prophet and priest are polluted; Even in My house I have found their wickedness," declares the LORD. "Therefore their way will be like slippery paths to them, They will be driven away into the gloom and fall down in it; For I will bring calamity upon them, The year of their punishment," declares the LORD. "Moreover, among the prophets of Samaria I saw an offensive thing: They prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel astray. "Also among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: The committing of adultery and walking in falsehood; And they strengthen the hands of evildoers, So that no one has turned back from his wickedness. All of them have become to Me like Sodom, And her inhabitants like Gomorrah. "Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets, 'Behold, I am going to feed them wormwood And make them drink poisonous water, For from the prophets of Jerusalem Pollution has gone forth into all the land'" (Jer 23:9-15).

What is Jeremiah *doing* in verses 9 and 10? He's lamenting the state of the people and the land.

Why? Because God has brought the covenant curse of famine as a result of the prophets' disobedience ("For the land mourns because of the curse. The pastures of the wilderness have dried up."). The famine here may be literal, but it may also be spiritual – it's a famine of the word of the Lord among the prophets and priests. God says the prophets and priests are both polluted (v.11), and he promises to judge them (v.12). In verse 13, God brings back shepherding imagery with the idea of leading God's people astray.

How are the Samarian prophets leading God's people astray in verse 13? By prophesying according to Baal.

How are the Jerusalem prophets leading them astray in verse 14? By walking in immorality (adultery) and falsehood (heterodoxy), and by not calling the people to repentance ("so that no one has turned back from his wickedness"). Calling people to repent of wickedness is part of biblical, spiritual shepherding.

So how does God judge these prophets in verse 15? Since the prophets and priests are polluted in verse 11 by immorality and heterodoxy, God will pollute them by feeding them on the wormwood and poisonous water of his judgment. This is an example of Lex Talionis, the law of retribution in which the punishment fits the crime.

“My Words to My People”—23:16-22

What’s ultimately the problem with these false prophets? They do not stand with God, which is evidenced by the fact that they do not speak his word. Instead they speak according to their own imaginings.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; They speak a vision of their own imagination, Not from the mouth of the LORD. "They keep saying to those who despise Me, 'The LORD has said, "You will have peace "'; And as for everyone who walks in the stubbornness of his own heart, They say, 'Calamity will not come upon you.' "But who has stood in the council of the LORD, That he should see and hear His word? Who has given heed to His word and listened? "Behold, the storm of the LORD has gone forth in wrath, Even a whirling tempest; It will swirl down on the head of the wicked. "The anger of the LORD will not turn back Until He has performed and carried out the purposes of His heart; In the last days you will clearly understand it. "I did not send *these* prophets, But they ran. I did not speak to them, But they prophesied. "But if they had stood in My council, Then they would have announced My words to My people, And would have turned them back from their evil way And from the evil of their deeds (Jer. 23:16-22).

How might we sum up the problem expressed in these verses? The prophets are speaking out of their own imaginations rather than out of God’s word. They speak without first being spoken to and listening (v. 18 “But who has stood in the council of the Lord, that he should see and hear his word? Who has given heed to his word and listened?”; v.21 “I did not send these prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied.”)

What would the prophets have said to God’s people if they had listened to God before speaking to them? They would have announced God’s words to God’s people (v.22). And they would have called them to turn back “from their evil way and from the evil of their deeds.” In other words, they would have called the people to repentance.

What a dire warning this presents to evangelical elders today! Commenting on an earlier chapter of Jeremiah, Tenth Presbyterian pastor Philip Ryken meditates on what will be the outcome of church members whose pastors who preach “Peace, peace” where there is no peace. Ryken writes,

“It is easy to imagine that many people will say the same thing on the day of judgment, when Jesus Christ will judge every man, woman, and child according to his or her deeds. ‘We hoped for peace,’ some will say. ‘My pastor told me there wouldn’t be any Hell.’ Or ‘My spiritual advisor said God would accept me as long as I did my best.’”¹

Elders, do you want to put the members of your church in this position?

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: From Sorrow to Hope*, from *Preaching the Word* series, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Crossway, 2001), 158.

Lost Sheep—50:6-7

When God's shepherds forsake, or overlook, or simply take for granted, God's Word, God's people will be led astray. As the Lord himself says through Jeremiah,

My people have become lost sheep; Their shepherds have led them astray. They have made them turn aside on the mountains; They have gone along from mountain to hill And have forgotten their resting place. All who came upon them have devoured them; And their adversaries have said, "We are not guilty, Inasmuch as they have sinned against the LORD who is the habitation of righteousness, Even the LORD, the hope of their fathers" (Jer 50:6-7).

What failures does God highlight among his shepherds in these verses? First, the shepherds have led the sheep astray. They have turned aside from the path, away from the green pastures, and along the dangerous cliffs of the mountains and from the mountains to the hills. The hills in Jeremiah are associated with the worship of Baal, the storm God (see 2:20—committing adultery on every high hill; also, 3:2—harlotry on the barren heights). The shepherds are probably not just the kings, but the priests as well, and likely the prophets too. All of them are leading the people into idolatry and away from the true worship of the true God.

Second, they've caused the sheep to forget their resting place.

Third, they've failed to protect them from the wild animals that would devour them.

What effect does this have on outsiders, that is, those who are not God's people? The outsiders begin to assume that they are not guilty for attacking the people of God, since the people of God are clearly compromised ("We are not guilty, inasmuch as they have sinned.")!

As we saw in our prior study, being a responsible shepherd means knowing where you are going with the sheep, knowing how to get there, doing your best to ensure that all the sheep actually get there, and making sure that your destination is a safe place where the sheep would have plenty of food and water and be protected by wild animals. Bad shepherds neglect all these responsibilities. They are more impressed with their own wisdom than with God's. They are more ambitious for their own fame than God's.

As shepherds of God's flock, we are responsible to God the Father, under Jesus Christ, by the power of his Spirit, to lead the congregation into the green pastures of God's word and true worship of him. We are responsible to protect them from those who would teach false doctrine (or no doctrine) to them. And we are responsible to lead them to enter into the rest of God by ensuring their salvation through the right teaching and application of the Scriptures according to 1 Timothy 4:12-16.

Hope in God as the true Shepherd—50:17-20

"Israel is a scattered flock, the lions have driven them away. The first one who devoured him was the king of Assyria, and this last one who has broken his bones is Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. "Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Behold, I am going to punish the king of Babylon and his land, just as I punished the king of Assyria. 'And I will

bring Israel back to his pasture and he will graze on Carmel and Bashan, and his desire will be satisfied in the hill country of Ephraim and Gilead. 'In those days and at that time,' declares the LORD, 'search will be made for the iniquity of Israel, but there will be none; and for the sins of Judah, but they will not be found; for I will pardon those whom I leave as a remnant.'

Who are the lions here? The kings of Assyria and Babylon. And again, Israel is scattered, which is a bad thing. God continues to want his sheep together.

What is God going to do for Israel in verse 19? He's going to bring Israel back to his pasture.

Why? So he can graze and be satisfied. So the goal of God for his sheep—the reason he's bringing them back to their own pasture—is to let them graze and be satisfied with eating from the good grass. He will pardon their iniquity, and grant them their desires for knowing and truly worshipping him. May our work contribute to, and not hinder, God's re-gathering.

EZEKIEL

Perhaps more than any prophet in the Old Testament, the prophet Ezekiel is known for his incisive condemnation of the shepherds of Israel.

Leading the Sheep to Sin—Ezekiel 22

In chapter 22, he points to how the shepherd's negligence results in bad behavior among the sheep.

There is a conspiracy of her prophets in her midst like a roaring lion tearing the prey. They have devoured lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in the midst of her. "Her priests have done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the profane, and they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they hide their eyes from My sabbaths, and I am profaned among them. Her princes within her are like wolves tearing the prey, by shedding blood and destroying lives in order to get dishonest gain. Her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord GOD,' when the LORD has not spoken. The people of the land have practiced oppression and committed robbery, and they have wronged the poor and needy and have oppressed the sojourner without justice. I searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. Thus I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; their way I have brought upon their heads," declares the Lord GOD (Ezek 22:25-30).

What particular failures of the prophets and priests are highlighted here? Instead of protecting the sheep, the prophets are preying on them. They're enriching themselves, and they're failing to teach God's holiness and model that holiness in their own lives. The princes are also acting like wolves instead of shepherds in order to enrich themselves with money that doesn't rightly belong to them. They are speaking from their own imagination instead of waiting for God to speak and saying what he says.

What results from these failures (in verses 29 and 30)? Sinfulness among the people. And it's a particular kind of sinfulness: the sheep are sinning against each other, oppressing each other, robbing each other, wronging the poor. Bad shepherding—failure to protect the sheep, failure to teach them about God's holiness, failure to model that holiness in our own lives—corrupts the behavior of the flock. As the shepherds go, so go the sheep.

Prophesy Against the Shepherds—34:1-10

Ezekiel 34 probably presents one of the most sustained denunciations of bad shepherds in the Bible.

Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, ² "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? "You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat *sheep* without feeding the flock. "Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. ⁵ "They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. ⁶ "My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek *for them*.'" ⁷ Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸ "As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but *rather* the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock; ⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰ "Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them'" (Ezek. 34:1-10).

What are the shepherds doing wrong here? First, they are failing to feed the sheep and feeding themselves instead. They are acting as if they own the sheep, able to treat them as they please, rather than as God has instructed them to treat the sheep—like owners, not stewards.

Second, they're not binding up the broken or healing the diseased.

Third, they're not gathering or bringing back the sheep that have been scattered. According to verse 5, this scattering happened because there was no shepherd.

Fourth, they ruled the sheep harshly (v.4 "with force and with severity you have dominated them").

Fifth, because they were scattered, the sheep were exposed to the danger of wild animals who would devour them. In verse 6, we're given an extended description of this scattering: "My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them." God laments the situation in which his sheep are scattered and wandering off alone.

How does God then react to such negligence? He says that he's against those shepherds, and he demands his sheep from them. He calls those shepherds to account. He sets himself in opposition to

them. He's not going to allow his sheep to endure that kind of treatment from negligent and domineering under-shepherds.

A Great Salvation—34:11-17

In the verses that follow this denunciation of the bad shepherds, God promises a great salvation for his sheep.

“As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest,” declares the Lord GOD. “I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment. As for you, My flock,” thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats” (Ezek. 34:12-17)

What is God's solution to the failure of his under-shepherds? He is going to shepherd the flock *himself*. And notice how he will do this. In verse 11, he will search for the sheep when they are scattered. In verse 12, he delivers them from all the dangers of the places where they were scattered. In verse 13, he brings them back and gathers them together and brings them to their own land, and he does this in order to feed them.

Feeding

Notice the repetition and detailed description in these verses of the feeding idea: “I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest.” This feeding and leading to rest is the goal of the searching and delivering and gathering. Everything leads up to the feeding and the rest.

Skipping down a few more verses, we read, “Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd” (Ezek. 34:23).

What's the principle activity of this one shepherd God places over the people? God will set his servant David over his people to feed them. Again, the feeding function stands by metonymy for everything a shepherd does. Feeding is the primary work of the shepherd. The reason the shepherd guides and guards the sheep, the reason he searches for the strays and binds up the wounded, is so that they can get to the green pastures and feed.

CONCLUSION

The composite sketch of shepherding we get from Jeremiah and Ezekiel is one of recognizing that the sheep are God's and not ours, which keeps us from using the flock for our own ends.

- This involves gathering the scattered sheep, binding the broken and healing the sick, and keeping them together without any of them missing.
- This involves protecting the flock from wolves rather than preying on them, and leading them to the safety and satisfaction of their own pasture land.
- And all this is for the end of feeding them on the knowledge of God's character and word and ways. All this shepherding work can be referred to in shorthand with the language of feeding the sheep, or grazing them on good pasture lands.

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