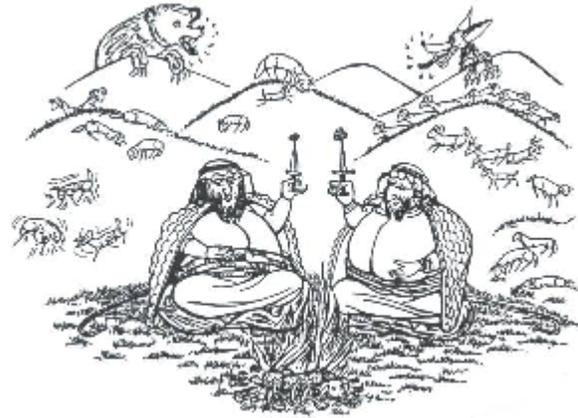


## UNDERSHEPHERDS AND GOD'S SHEEP – EZEKIEL 34:1-31

The God of Israel, the Great Shepherd, in this chapter has a complaint and resulting judgment against the shepherds of Israel who have failed to properly shepherd His people who are His precious sheep.

God's complaint against these unfaithful shepherds is in verses one to six. The shepherds fed themselves and neglected to feed the sheep. They used the sheep to satisfy their needs -- eating the fat, clothing themselves with the wool and killing the fat sheep without feeding them. They neglected to care for the diseased and broken and the ones scattered; the lost they did not seek. The shepherds have dominated them with severe force and have not protected them from predators who have ravaged the flock.



God declares His judgment against these unfaithful shepherds in verses 7-10. God's sheep became a prey for every beast of the field. The shepherds did not seek and search for the lost, but instead focused on feeding themselves rather than feeding and caring for the sheep. Because of their neglect God says that He is against these shepherds and will take His flock away from them so that they may not continue to take advantage of the sheep and feed off of them any more.



God promises to rescue together His. He will search and seek for His sheep from wherever they have been scattered. He will care for them as a shepherd and will gather them from all nations. He will pasture and feed them on the mountains of Israel. His sheep will be able to lie down in peace and the broken will be bound and the sickly will be strengthened.



God will judge the fat and the strong sheep who take advantage of the lean and weaker sheep in verses 16b-22. God will judge between one sheep and another and between the rams and male goats that dominate by eating the best of the pasture and fouling the waters so that the weaker suffer loss. He promises to judge the stronger that mistreat the weaker by causing them to stray thereby becoming prey to predators. Not only will these shepherds suffer God's judgment, but also will the sheep that take undue advantage of fellow sheep and mistreat the flock.

God continues by promising to send His Shepherd David (Messiah) to provide and protect His precious sheep, verses 23-31). He will be their God and David (Messiah) will be the prince among them. He will eliminate all harmful beasts, and the sheep will dwell in peace and safety. God will make His sheep a blessing to the surrounding peoples showering His blessing upon them. The trees and fields will be fruitful and plentiful; the sheep will be secure knowing that the Lord is their deliverer from all of their enemies. They will no longer be prey of the nations and will know the Lord is their God enjoying fruitfulness. They are truly His people -- the sheep of His pasture!



Jesus (Messiah) personifies this truth, *“What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 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 which was lost!’ I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”* (Lk. 15:1-7).

Jesus is saying that even one sheep is too valuable to lose. Kenneth E. Bailey in his book The Cross and The Prodigal\* reveals this well: *“The ninety-nine are left in the wilderness. They are certainly left with undershepherds and quite likely in a cave. Yet, is it wise to leave ninety-nine and wander away searching for the one? Christian missionaries have debated this point with Communist dialecticians in China. **Indeed, it is the shepherd’s willingness to go after the one that gives the ninety-nine their real security.** If the one is sacrificed in the name of the larger group, then each individual in the group is insecure. He knows that he too is of little value. If lost, he too will be left to die. **When the shepherd pays a high price to find the one, he thereby offers the profoundest security to the many.**”*

The implications for Christian leaders today should be quite clear. They are for our example (1 Cor. 10:6 & 11). God holds those to whom He has entrusted His precious sheep, accountable for how they shepherd and treat His flock. The undershepherds who use and misuse His flock for their own selfish benefit will incur God's discipline and justice.

This is also true of individuals within the flock who take advantage of those who are weaker for their own selfish benefit. The Apostle James says, *“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment”* (Jas. 3:1). However, the Apostle Paul says to those who desire to lead God's people in a pleasing manner, *“It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do”* (1 Tim. 3:1). See Paul's admonition to the elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:28-32).

It is a privilege to shepherd God's people as Jesus **graciously initiates** and as the undershepherd **faithfully responds** to Christ's good shepherding leadership.

\*Available through Crossways Ltd. 7930 Computer Ave South, Minneapolis MN 55435