

"Woe be to the Shepherds"

The Prophet Ezekiel, with God's Specific Instruction, Presents Potent Corrections on the way His Ministers have Dealt with His Sheep and their Negligence of their Responsibilities Toward Them!

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Though apparently directed at those responsible for the well being of God's people in more ancient times, we see in a lengthy narrative in the Book of Ezekiel a critical assessment of the job that His shepherds were doing. What is particularly discomfiting in this is the striking similarities we see in the job performance of the servants of His people at various times in history. Not the least of which being the modern era.

This passage is found in Ezekiel 34:1 *"And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, 2: Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; **Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?***

3: Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock.

4: The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them.

5: And they were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered.

*6: My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, **my flock was scattered** upon all the face of the earth, and **none did search or seek after them.**"*

Which Ministry?

Should we identify this chapter as applying to the modern era, we could consider it from two different perspectives. We could identify the shepherds being the professional ministers of the world's religions, the religious leadership of the

nations, not necessarily those of God's Church. But that leaves us with the consideration of whether or not God is even evaluating the pastors of the world's religions. We see these shepherds being chastised for their negligence, not for their apostasy or their deceptions! That should factor into **who** we consider being the ones faulted. We don't see the word 'led astray' or 'deceiving', in God's critique. That should cause us to be more inclined to identify them as being those ministers called to serve and to lead God's True Saints. How we regard this narrative, and to whom we assign it, can greatly differ, depending on what identification we make. Surely the ministry of God's True Church can't be the target of this scathing criticism, can it?

At least, that thought is comforting.

Continuing on: 7: *"Therefore, ye shepherds, hear the word of the LORD;*

*8: As I live, saith the Lord GOD, surely because my flock became a prey, and my flock became meat to every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, neither did my shepherds search for my flock, but **the shepherds fed themselves**, and fed not my flock;*

9: Therefore, O ye shepherds, hear the word of the LORD;

10: Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I am against the shepherds; and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock; neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them."

We're struck by the number of times God refers to His people as "my flock". He does so a dozen times in the chapter! Can they really be the unrepentant, unconverted, and semi-religious ethnic

nation, or must we tend toward seeing them as being His True Sheep?

A Regathering

11: *For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out.*
12: *As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered **in the cloudy and dark day.** When is this ‘cloudy and dark day’? Is it the ‘end time’? Then do these chapters also have a modern day application? The language would tend to strongly suggest a modern day application also.*

13: *And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country.*

14: *I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel.*

15: *I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord GOD.*

16: *I will seek that which was **lost**, and bring again that which was **driven away**, and will bind up that which was **broken**, and will strengthen that which was **sick**: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment.”*

We should ask ourselves, Do any of these situations exist in the modern era? Are there any under-fed, are any ‘lost’ or confused because of what happened, are any turned-off or ‘driven away’? Are any ‘broken’ as a result of abuse, are any weakened and sick due to spiritual malnutrition? Certainly not today!! (I jest.)

Does the Day Matter?

What we need to ask ourselves is, IF and WHEN such conditions exist, does God regard the matter any differently? Ancient day or modern day? If He was concerned for ‘His sheep’ in an ancient

times, would He be any less attentive to the same condition in the present? Why would we dismiss such a prophecy (speaking forth, not future telling) against those He delegated with such responsibility?

What we all should consider is God’s disapproval of the shepherds’ actions on account of their not properly feeding God’s flock. If this were referring to the ministers of the world’s religions, how could He ask that of them? How could they be expected to feed God’s flock if they didn’t **have** the full truth with which to feed them? How could those who didn’t believe the Truth be regarded as God’s flock? From these considerations, we’re drawn to conclude that God is faulting His ministry, not the un-called religious leaders of whatever day.

Beyond Neglect

But, there’s an even more despicable condition that God addresses through the Prophet Jeremiah. Not only their benign neglect which we read of in Ezekiel 34, of not providing them with a spiritual growth environment, but dealings that cause them actual harm! The ‘sheep’ in this picture don’t drift away as a result of not being fed, they are actually driven off by interpersonal abuse, with no follow-up attempts to resolve whatever problem there was and to restore them to the fold!

Jeremiah 23:1 *“Woe be unto the pastors that **destroy and scatter** the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD.*

2: *Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the LORD.*

3: *And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.*

4: *And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall **fear** no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the LORD.*

Verse 4 points out the conditions: fear, being dismayed (disillusioned) and lacking (not having

the Faith basis they ought to have.) In this, we are directed more toward the political scene than the doctrinally deficient condition. What would they ‘fear’? Inappropriate use of ‘authority’?

The following verses continue, describing the millennial setting.

5: *Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.*

6: *In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.* (Compare this with Zechariah 14:20)

7: *Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that they shall no more say, The LORD liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt;*

8: *But, The LORD liveth, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land.”* Obviously, this identifies the end times!

The Emotional Reaction

Considering what happened to the Church of God in the early 1990’s, we can identify with how the prophet reacted to the conditions he saw. Continuing:

9: *“Mine heart within me is broken because of the prophets; all my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, and like a man whom wine hath overcome, because of the LORD, and because of the words of his holiness.*

10: *For the land is full of adulterers; for because of swearing the land mourneth; the pleasant places of the wilderness are dried up, and their course is evil, and their force is not right.”* The forces working within the Church veered way off course and brought the established ‘parent organization’ to an irreversible demise.

11: *“For both prophet and priest are profane; yea, in **my house** have I found their wickedness, saith the LORD.”* The leadership and the local ‘servant’ became corrupted politically and doctrinally.

Incredibly, keeping that paycheck coming was the prime motivating factor with many.

12: *“Wherefore their way shall be unto them as slippery ways in the darkness: they shall be driven on, and fall therein: for I will bring evil upon them, even the year of their visitation, saith the LORD.”*

Back in Baal’s Embrace

A ‘new’ understanding, a whole new paradigm, as it was called, was brought in. It was very obvious to those who had ‘been there’ as being what they’d come out of from their previous religious experiences. It wasn’t new at all! In fact, the bulk of it was very old!

13: *“And I have seen folly in the prophets of Samaria; they prophesied in Baal, and caused my people Israel to err.*

14: *I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing: they commit adultery, and walk in lies: **they strengthen also the hands of evil-doers**, that none doth return from his wickedness: they are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah.”*

This passage is so reminiscent of another in Malachi: *“And now we call the proud happy; yea, **they that work wickedness are set up**; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered.”* (Malachi 3:15)

15: *Therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets; Behold, I will feed them with wormwood, and make them drink the water of gall: for from the prophets of Jerusalem is profaneness gone forth into all the land.*

16: *Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD.*

17: *They say still unto them that despise me, The LORD hath said, Ye shall have peace; and they say unto every one that walketh after the imagination of his own heart, No evil shall come upon you.*

18: *For who hath stood in the counsel of the LORD, and hath perceived and heard his word? who hath marked his word, and heard it?*

19: *Behold, a whirlwind of the LORD is gone forth*

in fury, even a grievous whirlwind: it shall fall grievously upon the head of the wicked.

*20: The anger of the LORD shall not return, until he have executed, and till he have performed the thoughts of his heart: **in the latter days ye shall consider it perfectly.**"*

Finally Seeing the Problems

Are we talking about an end time condition? Is this telling us we will see this condition in the end-time and come to understand it better **then** than ever before?

21: "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. 22: But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings. This concluding statement shows there remains a degree of hope. They **could** repent and turn things around, if they really wanted to! It also shows us that it isn't really speaking to the religious leaders of the land who are not and never were God's True Servants. This may lay uncomfortably closer to home!

How to Apply This

In identifying where the focus of these passages lie, we have a number of possible scenarios to consider. First, it being the condition within the priesthood of ancient Israel in the days of Jeremiah and Ezekiel continuing right up to the time of Christ. Secondly, the situation within the Church in the apostate era, well underway in the second century. Are the apostate religious leaders of that era included? Then, we have the conditions within God's Church in the modern era. Is it applicable to the apostasy embraced after the late 1980's?

But beyond that, we should consider the various 'splinter groups' that came into being as a result of the late day apostasy. Is their condition any better? So many of them legitimize themselves by attempting to replicate what once was, doctrinally **and** politically, in the organization God closed out for good cause. Are they exemplary with regard to doing the job Christ wants of them? This is the

troubling area if what we read has the modern day application it seems to have.

Perhaps we can answer that from what we find them doing (and not doing)!

☐ Are they faithful to the Truth once delivered? Do they proclaim it faithfully and forcefully, or do they 'hold back'?

☐ Is there a concerted effort to educate the membership for service, not only in the future, but in the present day? (2nd Tim. 3:17, Matt. 25:14-30)

☐ Is there an environment provided for development of True Faith and the uninhibited expression of it in the congregations? (1st Thessalonians 1:5-8)

☐ Is there a ministerial effort that seeks to reach and restore the disaffected who have, for whatever reason, wandered away? Both on the leadership level and on the membership level? (Ezek. 34:4)

☐ Is there a functional environment within the congregations that accepts and employs passages such as Matthew 18:15-17 and 1st Corinthians 6:1-8 when working to resolve problems?

☐ Is there an acceptance of others of like mind, who may affiliate under different banners, based on the indwelling of God's Spirit? (1st John 1:3-7)

These are the characteristics of a healthy congregation, functioning in accord with New Testament directives.

By THIS Shall All Men Know

What is most telling is the reluctance to, and the outright aversion to, contact and work with those having personal weaknesses who need support or who have been abused and 'driven off' by bad judgment calls and interpersonal offences that are inevitable in any human association.

It's here that the words of John in his 1st Epistle is telling. 7: "*Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.*

8: *He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.*

9: *In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.*

10: *Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

11: *Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another... (1st John 4: 7-11 & 20-21)*

20: *If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?*

21: *And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also."*

What was the major deficiency in God's Church in its recent manifestation? What is its remedy in the current state? We are given the answer!

34: *"A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. 35: **By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.**" (John 13:35)*

How Should WE React?

God speaks rather pointedly and in extremely negative terms toward those who are **supposed** to be representing His way of life and selflessly serving His flocks. What position should we take in all of this? Should we just hold a similar negative regard for these neglectful 'shepherds'? Should we stand back and throw rotten eggs at them? Are we justified in amplifying the criticism, but otherwise doing nothing?


Or, should we recognize what we are given here? We have God's own indication of what He wants. Should those awarded the task fail to adequately address the needs of His sheep, should we be content to just sit back knowing that due criticism has been leveled?

I pose here that now that we know of the situation, that the shepherds of God's True flock can and at times do fail to uphold the standards and nourish the sheep of His Fold adequately for endurance and

equipping them to **do** His Work, that we ought to step up to the challenge and provide needed infill for their deficiencies. God, in telling us what He wants, has effectively provided motivation, and can we say, a mandate to become personally involved? Nothing motivates a 'self-serving leader' than to see his own 'flock' moving on ahead of him!

There is no situation that can affect greater stability in God's Church than an informed and motivated membership. Congregations can be our underlying strength, if we let them. Structured hierarchies can amplify our most insidious weaknesses, as Ezekiel and Jeremiah show. We should, after due time, **know** the Truth and be quick to defend it against all inroads of subversion, compromise and contamination. That's the true mandate of those respectfully referred to as "the pillars and grounds of the Truth"! ¹

What we need to come to grips with is the obvious. If God is so concerned as to speak so strongly against those who supposedly serve Him by pastoring His flocks, then shouldn't **we** regard it as a firm mandate to **do** those things He faults them for **not** doing? Let's turn something negative into something positive.

So many represent themselves as being the 'only true shepherd' in this era, yet exhibit many of the negative characteristics criticized. God says He will effect a re-gathering of His sheep (suggesting they exist in more than one concurrent fold). Where will our competing and mutually exclusive religious entities stand when God re-gathers His entire flock as He says in the last ten verses of Ezekiel 34? And are WE willing to 'go up into the gaps' where others won't? ² 

¹ (1st Timothy 3:15) This potent instruction to a minister, young Timothy, refers to the Church of the Living God using these words. Paul wasn't saying HE (Timothy) was the pillar and ground of the Truth, but that THEY were. Obviously from this description we can see that the early Church didn't see an over-structure as being the preeminent authority, but that the membership provided that essential stability. Thus, the membership should be allowed significant say in what was taught and how things were done. It was when the Church subordinated its function to a professional ministry that Apostasy took firm hold. Sadly, both then and recently!

² Ezekiel 13:5 Referring to rebuilding the walls of defense with real and substantial stones, not just ethereal visions.