

GOD'S HEART FOR HIS PEOPLE (The Covenant of Peace)

Ezekiel 34:1–31

Key Verse: 34:23 “And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.”

Let's briefly review shepherding. Shepherding begins with Jesus' love. Those who have Jesus' love are called to tend his flock. How should a shepherd see the sheep? A shepherd sees them with compassion, like sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless. What then is the practical work God expects from shepherds? And how can we be the shepherd God wants us to be? This is what we want to learn today.

Some may wonder why the title is “God's heart for his people” and the subtitle is “The Covenant of Peace”? God's heart is not mentioned in this passage. But his heart permeates the entire passage. Out of his heart, God shows us his example of practical shepherding. God's shepherding reaches its climax when He promises to send His Messiah after his own heart. His Messiah brings the covenant of peace. And the covenant of peace through Christ gives us a new heart and a spirit for God's people that we can imitate and do God's practical work of shepherding.

So, my opening question is, “What is your heart for people like?” Is yours after God's own heart, full of love, compassion and mercy? When I examine my heart, I feel like it is tainted with indifference, selfishness and cynicism. I can't be a shepherd. However, this message is for those who feel like me. Let us fix our eyes on God and see his practical work of shepherding us. Let us renew our faith in God's covenant of peace through the Messiah. Let's claim by faith the new heart of Christ through his Spirit. Let's imitate God's practical work of shepherding.

I. God's practical work of shepherding us

Are you familiar with the book of Ezekiel? In short, Ezekiel, a priest, was one of the first group of Israelites captured and exiled to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC. His prophecies had two main themes: God's warning of judgment upon Israel and all nations—because Israel broke their covenant relationship with God—and second, God's hope for the restoration of his people and all nations.

The immediate context of today's passage is found in 33:21, which says, “In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, a fugitive from Jerusalem came to me and said, ‘The city has been struck down.’” In 586 BC, Jerusalem and the temple were completely demolished. Most of the people of Israel were exiled, scattered throughout the world. Ezekiel's prophecies were fulfilled. Now, in chapter 34, in the midst of great tragedy, we hear God speaking through Ezekiel about what He was going to do.

Firstly, God dismisses the shepherds of Israel out of his shepherd heart (1-10). Look at verses 1-3. **“The word of the Lord came to me: ‘Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of**

Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep.” God was not indifferent to the suffering of his people. Rather, God’s heart was broken because of the negligence, abuse and greed of the shepherds of Israel. Who were the shepherds of Israel? Kings and the religious leaders were supposed to be shepherds. In this passage, God was particularly against the Israelite kings. Why? Instead of feeding their people, they fed themselves. Even worse, they ate the fat and clothed themselves with the wool, slaughtering the sheep for their gain. They didn’t do their practical work of shepherding. They didn’t strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strayed, and seek the lost. Rather, they ruled God’s people with force and harshness (4b). God prosecuted them for their abandonment of duty saying, “I am against you, shepherds of Israel!” What happened to the sheep? They were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. They wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. Literally they got deported to Babylon and were scattered over the face of the earth. Spiritually they wandered from the Lord God. When God saw his wandering and suffering sheep, God’s heart was grieved. God lamented, “My sheep were scattered... My sheep were scattered, with none to search or seek for them” (5b-6).

What did God do about this? In verses 7-10, God called his people ‘my sheep’ six more times. When his sheep were neglected, abused and abandoned by the shepherds, God was against the shepherds. He made the kings into captives. Look at verse 10. **“Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.”** God held them accountable. May God give us the fear of God in our hearts, for he will hold each of us to account as well.

Secondly, God promises to shepherd his sheep (11-16). After firing the bad shepherds, what did God himself promise to do? Look at verses 11-12. **“For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.”** Notice how many times God said, “I will!” God promised to bring them out of captivity in Babylon and other nations. God promised to bring them back to Israel that they should lie down in good grazing land (13-14). In verses 15-16, God promised to do practical work of shepherding for his people. Let’s read them together. **“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.”**

What can we learn about God? God loves his sheep. Out of love, God promised to step in and do what the human shepherds of Israel failed to do. God would do everything necessary for his sheep. He will seek all the lost and bring back the strayed. He will bind the injured, strengthen the

weak. He will have them lie down in safety and security. The picture of Jesus with a lamb in his arms symbolizes the kingdom of God where the harassed, helpless, anxious, lost, injured and fearful sheep can enjoy permanent and perfect safety and security. God is also just. In 16b he said, "...and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice." Who are the fat and strong sheep? And why would God destroy them? Let's see next.

Thirdly, God judges between sheep and sheep (17–22). Surprisingly, there were sheep—strong and fat—who bullied others. They grazed first, trampled the rest, drank clean water, and muddied what remained. They pushed the weak aside. Thus the Lord God, the Shepherd for his flock, said to the cruel bullies, "Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep" (17,20,22). God promises to rescue the weak from the selfish strong sheep. God sees when people abuse others. God will judge so we can trust in God's justice over all evil. May God have mercy upon us all, including our children, that we can share food, water and blessings with our fellow brothers and sisters. May God bless us to develop true friendship with our fellow sheep.

Fourthly, God promises to raise up one shepherd for his people (23-24). Let's read verse 23. **"And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd."** God calls this one shepherd 'my servant David'. Who was David? He was the second king of Israel, Israel's greatest king, a man after God's own heart. Acts 13:22 says, **"[God] raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.'"** Though he was flawed, David was the shadow of the perfect shepherd, who will shepherd God's people with God's own heart. Who is this Perfect Shepherd? He is the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Out of God's heart for his people, God swore to himself in verse 24. "And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken." What then was God's will that the Messiah would do?

Fifthly, God promises to make a covenant of peace through the Messiah (25-31). Look at verse 25a. **"I will make with them a covenant of peace."** Why did God have to make a covenant of peace? It was because his people broke their covenant, or promise to God, and were therefore sent into Babylonian exile. They broke their covenant by worshipping foreign gods and by allying themselves with worldly powers. They disobeyed God by not practicing justice and mercy. Thus, the Lord God of Israel, who is holy, spit them out of the Promised Land. Their kings, the fat and strong sheep, and even the wandering sheep violated their covenant with God. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Once they were God's people, but now they were no longer his people. What they need and what we desperately need is the perfect shepherd after God's own heart who will lay down his life as a ransom to restore us back to God. God desperately wants to make this covenant with them and us. How is Jesus a man after God's own heart in his matter? Hebrews 10: 5-7 says **"Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'"** In obedience to God's will Jesus came to give his life as the Lamb of God. Jesus became the Good Shepherd who made the covenant of peace between God and man possible by giving his life as a perfect ransom.

What do the people in the covenant of peace look like? Verses 25b-31 describe it poetically. “They will dwell securely in their land”(25b, 27, 28). “I will make them... a blessing and I will send them showers of blessing”(26). Freedom from sin and Satan! No more slavery. No more wild beasts. No more hunger, and no suffering (27b). The covenant of peace is not only for the Israelites, but for all nations and all creation. The best blessing of the new covenant is found in verses 30-31. **“And they shall know that I am the Lord their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord God. And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord God.”**

The covenant of peace is now already offered to anyone who receives Jesus’ broken body and his shed blood on the cross as their true spiritual food and drink. And this covenant of peace is completely fulfilled by Jesus in heaven. Rev 7:17 says, **“For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”**

The covenant of peace truly highlights God’s heart, God’s vision and hope through the shepherd, Jesus Christ. The covenant of peace is what God truly wants to make with you and me. The covenant of peace is the ultimate goal of his shepherding his people. If you feel insecure, threatened, ‘I don’t matter,’ receive Jesus as the Lamb of God for your sins and as the shepherd of your soul. If you feel broken and wounded, helpless under the power of sin and Satan, accept the covenant of peace and receive his healing, binding, rescuing and freedom!

I don’t want you to miss another blessing that comes through the covenant of peace. Ezekiel 36:25-27 proclaims **“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”** When we are in the new covenant, God gives us a new heart. He takes away our heart of stone, and gives us a heart of flesh. If you have accepted Christ and his covenant of peace, then each of us is a man or woman after God’s own heart right now, by faith! I want to ask my opening question again, “What is your heart like?” Even though you may not feel that you have God’s own heart, you do have a new heart. Believe it by faith. Claim it. Yes- I have God’s shepherd heart right now! As we come to Jesus continually, our hearts are cleansed, renewed and conformed more and more to God’s own heart. Amen. We also have a new spirit, God’s Spirit within us.

II. Our practical work of shepherding others

What then will we do believing that we have God’s heart and God’s Spirit? We can’t help doing what God, the Ultimate Shepherd, wills and does: shepherding his people. We do what Jesus, the Good Shepherd commands us to do: shepherding his sheep.

What then is the practical work of shepherding? There are several things the bad shepherds failed to do but God was determined to do. God is feeding the hungry, strengthening the weak, healing the sick, binding up the injured, bringing back the strayed, and seeking the lost. These tasks seem to require a great amount of knowledge, wisdom, discernment, not to mention certain traits like love, patience, persistence, hope etc. Some of us might be scared to fail. Or In fact, shepherding seems too demanding and difficult, while we feel inadequate. Or we think, it's hard enough to take care of myself and my own family! How can I take care of others like this, with all their needs? Shouldn't only seasoned, well-trained, experienced and gifted shepherds do these things? No! Each of us can do so. How? You can do what you can do by faith. We can work together as a team. Let's think about finding the lost. Imagine you lost your cell phone. What will you do? What if you lost your car key? Your pet? Or your child? What about God's sheep then? It is a matter of heart. We have a new heart of God within us. So now, let's pray- Lord, help me to see others with the heart of yours that you have given me! Help me to see one person as a lost sheep, or lost child, and seek one lost person on the campus, or at my workplace, or at the store, or at the park, with your heart that lives within me. Amen!

Strengthening the weak, healing the sick and binding the injured seems like something only a trained healer can do. Healing the sick requires careful examination, correct diagnosis and timely treatment. But don't be afraid! When we have God's heart for the sick, we will find a way to help. We can pray for the physically and spiritually sick. We can share the life-giving word of God, or word of encouragement to strengthen the weak. We can serve a meal to someone in need for fellowship. We can ask help from others in our community.

However, the most important thing we can do is to have the covenant of peace and share the covenant of peace through Christ with others. The covenant of peace in Christ makes the weary and burdened secure, strengthens the weak, heals the sick, binds up the injured, brings back the strayed and finds the lost. We can do our best humanly. But ultimately, God, the ultimate Shepherd, will provide you with the proper ways and means to tend them. Only retain and renew God's heart for his people and share the covenant of peace in Jesus Christ with others around you.

In conclusion, the Lord God is looking for shepherds with his own heart. Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd is looking for shepherds who have absolute faith in the covenant of peace and who are ready to do the practical work of shepherding. People around us are like sheep who yearn for the covenant of peace. May God help us believe that we have God's heart and do the practical work of shepherding by leading others to the covenant of peace in Jesus Christ.