

"The flock of God."

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In the eightieth Psalm Asaph addresses God as the Shepherd of Israel, and likens His people to a flock. In the one hundredth Psalm Israel takes the ground of being Jehovah's people and "the sheep of His pasture." Jeremiah, too, in the same strain, speaks of God's ancient people as a "beautiful flock" (Jer. 13: 20). But while God ever remained the Great Shepherd of Israel, He also delegated authority to under-shepherds who were responsible to care for the flock.

In the exercise of this responsibility the shepherds lamentably failed, and as a result the flock was ruined and scattered. In Ezekiel 34 we have a solemn denunciation of these under-shepherds for the violation of their trust. In the first four verses three distinct charges are brought against them.

First. *They are charged with using their position to exalt themselves at the expense of the flock.* "Thus saith the Lord God unto the shepherds: Woe to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock." They fed themselves; they indulged themselves; they clothed themselves, but they allowed the flock to perish for lack of food (vers. 2, 3).

Second. *The shepherds are charged with having utterly neglected the flock.* There were weak sheep, but they had not strengthened them; there were sick sheep, but they had not healed them; there were wounded sheep, but they had not bound up their wounds; there were sheep driven away from the flock, but they made no effort to recover them; and there were wandering sheep, but they had not gone after the lost (ver. 4). Occupied with themselves they had entirely neglected the good of the sheep.

Third. *These shepherds are charged with having ruled God's flock "with force and with cruelty."* Not only had the sheep been neglected, but they had been crushed and oppressed for the selfish ends of the rulers.

But the failure of the shepherds of Israel has been repeated, alas, by the shepherds of God's people today. For in this day also God has His flock. Passing through this world, the Lord Jesus gathered a company of Jewish believers around Himself, leading them outside the Jewish fold. To these the Gentile believers were afterwards added, and, according to the Lord's own word, there was "one flock and one Shepherd" (John 10: 16). The Lord Himself is the Good Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep, and the Great Shepherd, as risen again from among the dead — the One who has triumphed over the power of death, and He can say, "My sheep shall never perish, neither shall any one pluck them out of My hand" (John 10: 28). But furthermore, the Lord is the Chief Shepherd, and as such He has again delegated the oversight of His flock to under-shepherds. Paul, in his farewell address to the elders of the church at Ephesus, gives the under-shepherds a solemn charge in Acts 20: 28-35. He warns them to take heed to themselves, and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers. He gives them a threefold exhortation in reference to the flock, which answers to the threefold denunciation of the shepherds of Israel.

First. Instead of exalting themselves they are exhorted to "feed the church of God" (ver. 28).

Second. Instead of neglecting the sheep they are to "watch" and "support the weak" (vers. 31, 35).

Third. Instead of ruling with "force and cruelty" they are to remember "it is more blessed to give

than to receive" (ver. 35).

Furthermore, the Apostle Peter, before his departure, gives a threefold charge to the under-shepherds (1 Peter 5: 1-4).

First. They are exhorted to "feed the flock of God."

Second. To care for the flock, "taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind."

Third. They are warned not to lord it over God's heritage. Not to drive the flock but to lead as "ensamples to the flock."

But, as we have seen, these are the very things in which the shepherds of old so signally failed. Instead of feeding the flock they fed themselves; instead of taking the oversight they neglected the flock; instead of being ensamples they ruled the flock with harshness and cruelty. And, alas, as the shepherds of Israel failed, so, in like manner, the shepherds of the Christian flock have failed, and with a like result. Turning again to Ezekiel 34, we find the prophet, in verses 5 and 6, depicting the pitiful condition of God's flock as a result of the failure of the shepherds.

The sheep are scattered for the lack of a shepherd to lead. Being scattered they become a prey to the beasts of the field. Harassed by the beasts of prey they wander through all the barren mountains and on every high hill. Instead of one flock — one beautiful flock — we have scattered, harassed, and wandering sheep with none to search or seek after them. And what a solemn and striking picture of the condition of God's people today. As a result of the failure of the leaders, God's people have been scattered, and being scattered they have fallen a prey to the enemy. United they could have resisted the inroads of the enemy, but scattered they fall an easy prey to every evil; and under the power of evil they are starving and wandering in a solitary way in this barren world.

Having portrayed the sorrowful condition of the sheep, the Lord proceeds to pass sentence upon the responsible shepherds: "Thus saith the Lord God, Behold I am against the shepherds, and I will require my flock at their hand" (vers. 7-10).

But if God is against the shepherds He is for the sheep, as He says, "I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them." And in the verses that follow we have a magnificent description of how God shepherds His flock. And as the Chief Shepherd acts so should the under-shepherds. Thus in these verses (11-16) we have the perfect example for the true-hearted shepherd, whether in Israel or amongst God's people to-day. We do well to take to heart the sevenfold actings of the Chief Shepherd as set forth in these touching verses.

First. God says, "Behold I, even I, will . . . SEARCH for my sheep." They have been scattered, and they have wandered, but they are "mine," says God, and "I will SEARCH for them." May we never forget, whatever the condition of the sheep, they belong to Christ. He thought of them from all eternity, but, alas, we can only give them the odd moments of our lives. He left His home of glory to seek His sheep, and can we not leave our poor homes to seek them? He went to the uttermost distance of the cross to find His sheep, but we can hardly go into the next street to seek them.

Second. Having sought them He "tends" them, for thus the passage should read, "I will both search for My sheep and TEND them as a shepherd TENDETH his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered." His sheep are the objects of his tender care. After the Good Samaritan found that poor wounded man and bound up his wounds, he brought him to an inn and "took care of him," and ere he left he put the man in charge of the host, saying, "Take care of him." He seems to say

to the host, "Do what I have been doing." And immediately afterwards we hear Martha coming to the Lord and saying, "Dost Thou not care." Oh yes, Martha, He cares, as you will soon learn when the death of your brother plunges you into the deep waters of sorrow, and He comes and walks with you and weeps with you. Yes, blessed be His name, He cares, but how little we care. We have failed to act the part of the host. We have failed in tending the sheep. But not only does the Lord tend His sheep, but He does it in a very blessed way. It is not as one far removed in some high position giving directions for the care of the sheep, but it is as a shepherd "*among his sheep that are scattered.*" We speak of the Lord in the midst of two or three gathered together in His name, and blessedly true, but we do well to remember there is such a thing as the Lord "among His sheep that are scattered." If we have driven them away, will He desert them? Never. If we have scattered them, will He forsake them? Never. Will He leave them because they follow not with us? Surely not. He will never give them up. Are they scattered? He is "among His sheep that are scattered." We speak at times as if "two or three gathered to His name" would imply a company of saints apart from the ruin of Christendom, but let us never forget that, however glorious the future destiny of the church, that, at this moment, the one church of God, the church to which we belong, is a ruined and scattered church so far as any outward display is concerned.

Third. Further, the Lord says: "I will DELIVER them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day." While leaders are busy darkening the sky with their controversies, the enemy is busy scattering the sheep. While the shepherds wrangle, the sheep wander. We can scatter, but what little power we have to deliver. But the Lord will deliver. Not one of His sheep will be left behind when He acts in delivering power.

Fourth. But the Lord does not deliver His people from the powers of the enemy and then leave them; He also "*gathers*" them, and so we read, "I will bring them out from the peoples and GATHER them from the countries." "Separation" and "gathering" must go together. Separation without gathering only puffs up and leads to the spirit of the Pharisee, and to further scattering. When the Lord separates His people from evil He gathers them around Himself. Christ is God's great gathering centre. We may get Christians together, but if it is not gathering to Christ and with Christ it will only add to the scattering. We may gather people around some great truth, or to deepen spirituality, or to increase holiness and thus make a holiness party; or we may get Christians together to express the truth of the One Body, and to maintain a scriptural discipline, and thus make an ecclesiastical party. We may gather believers together to preach the gospel, and thus make an evangelical party. But, however good our intentions, if we fall short of gathering to Christ as the living centre we shall only add to the scattering. It has been well said by another, "It is not Christians but Christ who is become God's centre. We may gather Christians together, but if it is not Christ in one's own spirit, it is scattering. God knows no centre of union but the Lord Jesus Christ. It is Himself the object, and nothing but Christ can be the centre. Whatever is not gathering round that centre, for Him and from Him, is scattering. There may be gathering, but, if not 'with Me,' it is scattering. We are by nature so essentially sectarian that we have need to watch against this. I cannot make Christ the centre of my efforts if He is not the centre of my thoughts" (J.N.D.). The Lord Himself has said, "He that is not with Me is against Me, and He that gathereth not with Me scattereth" (Luke 11: 23).

Fifth. But what does God do with His delivered and gathered saints? "HE WILL BRING THEM TO THEIR OWN LAND" (ver. 13). There is a company we can call our own (Acts 4: 23), and there is a country we can call "our own." It is a heavenly country, but, alas, as the result of the scattering of the sheep the heavenly calling of God's people is almost unknown, and the people of God have lost their pilgrim character, have settled down in this world, and sought to make the world that nailed Christ to the cross a respectable and comfortable place. Israel has been scattered and lost their land, Christians

have been scattered and have lost the truth of their heavenly calling. But when God takes His people in hand, whether earthly or heavenly, it will be to "bring them to their own land." And what more important in this day than to seek to arouse the people of God to their heavenly calling. If gathered by the Lord it is that we may be led by the Lord into our own country.

Sixth. Having led His flock into their own land the Lord "FEEDS THEM IN A GOOD PASTURE." The true food for the Christian is in the heavenly country. When Israel were brought to their own land they fed upon the old corn of the land (Joshua 5: 11, 12). Passing through the wilderness we need Christ as the manna, but as a heavenly people we feed upon Christ as "the old corn of the land." We need to feed upon all the glories and perfections of Christ in the place where He is. And what we feed upon forms us. To feed upon Christ in His earthly path of humiliation will win our affections, but to feed upon Christ in His glories will change our characters. Beholding with unveiled face the glory of the Lord we are changed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor. 3: 18).

Seventh. And lastly, in that heavenly land He gives His people "Rest": "I WILL CAUSE THEM TO LIE DOWN" (ver. 15). In this world there is no lasting rest for the people of God. The Christian is like the dove that went out from the Ark and "found no rest for the sole of her foot." The raven found corruption to feed on, but the dove found nothing but death. "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God." And when God brings His people to rest it is "in a fat pasture" (ver. 14). Hungry sheep will not lie down in a fat pasture, they will feed. If they lie down it is a sure proof they are satisfied. The great Shepherd of the sheep leads them into a region of satisfied desire. When we awake in His likeness we shall be satisfied. Yes, but "He shall see of the fruit of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied." He will make us to lie down in perfect rest, and "He will rest in His love."

How perfect are the ways of the Chief Shepherd of the sheep. In the light of this perfect example of shepherd care may we have grace to judge our past failures and seek, for the little time that may yet remain, to shape our service according to this divine standard. How better can we serve the flock, or seek the approbation of the Chief Shepherd, than by,

1. Searching for the Lord's sheep,
2. Tending the sheep,
3. Delivering the sheep from evil,
4. Gathering the sheep to the Lord,
5. Leading the sheep to their own land,
6. Feeding the sheep, and
7. Bringing the sheep into rest.

May we remember the words of the Lord, "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them" (John 13: 16). And if we "do" them, when the Chief Shepherd shall appear we "shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (1 Peter 5: 4).