



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for March 8, 2009
Released on Wednesday, March 4, 2009

“New Leadership”

Devotional Reading: John 10:11–18.

Background Scripture: Ezekiel 34.

Lesson Text: Ezekiel 34:23–31.

Ezekiel 34:23–31

23 And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd.

24 And I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David a prince among them; I the Lord have spoken it.

25 And I will make with them a covenant of peace, and will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land: and they shall dwell safely in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods.

26 And I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing; and I will cause the shower to come down in his season; there shall be showers of blessing.

27 And the tree of the field shall yield her fruit, and the earth shall yield her increase, and they shall be safe in their land, and shall know that I am the Lord, when I have broken the bands of their yoke, and delivered them out of the hand of those that served themselves of them.

28 And they shall no more be a prey to the heathen, neither shall the beast of the land devour them; but they shall dwell safely, and none shall make them afraid.

29 And I will raise up for them a plant of renown, and they shall be no more consumed with hunger in the land, neither bear the shame of the heathen any more.

30 Thus shall they know that I the Lord their God am with them, and that they, even the house of Israel, are my people, saith the Lord God.

31 And ye my flock, the flock of my pasture, are men, and I am your God, saith the Lord God.

LESSON AIMS:

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Describe the future kingdom of peace that Ezekiel prophesied.
2. Tell how this message would have been especially comforting in light of the fall of Jerusalem.
3. Express hope in the future based on his or her relationship with God.

INTRODUCTION:

Several significant things happened in Ezekiel’s world since the time of last week’s lesson from Ezekiel 11. For one, the prophet had suffered the personal tragedy of the death of his wife (Ezekiel 24:18). Ezekiel’s difficult task at that time was not to mourn in public, but to obey the will of God and use the occasion as a prophetic

moment in speaking to the people. Although we have no reason to doubt the inner strength of Ezekiel, we can easily understand the deep scars this event left on him. We appreciate that he was a sad and lonely man without his beloved mate. Ezekiel undoubtedly was viewed as odd because of his curious behavior (see Ezekiel 4, 5, and 12). His wife may have been the only one who had understood him.

A second major turning point was the news that the city of Jerusalem had fallen (Ezekiel 33:21). While this news may have been less than surprising given the many prophecies of Jerusalem's demise, the news still would have been shocking and painful to the exiles. Their longing to go back to Jerusalem entered a new phase, for there was no Jerusalem to which they might return. Their beautiful temple, a centuries-old focus of national identity and pride, lay in ruins.

There is a shift in Ezekiel's tone beginning with chapter 33. Up to that point, the prophet had been preaching doom and gloom. Chapter 33 begins to be more hopeful, looking to the future and emphasizing the justice and mercy of God. This is the context for the marvelous vision of the future that is the basis of today's lesson.

Ezekiel foretold the rule of a leader who would preside over the ideal kingdom. This ruler would deliver from and guard against enemies, supply the material needs of His people, and even change the course of nature. This could only be Israel's Messiah.

PROVISION FOR NEEDS—Ezekiel 34:23-24

1. How does the *one* Shepherd of our passage differ from many of Israel's shepherds in the past?

Our previous lesson focused on the promise of a new heart for God's preserved and restored people. With this heart they will be able to glorify Him continually. This week's passage adds to this the promise of a new leader who will provide the external circumstances in which Israel can serve their God.

The leader the Lord promised to set over them is called a shepherd. "Shepherd" is a recurring and apt description of an Israelite king, and the nation is likened to a flock of sheep (Ps. 78:52, 70-72; Jer. 13:17-20). The one Shepherd who will rule is set over against the many unworthy shepherds who took advantage of the nation for their own gain (Jer. 23:1-2).

2. In what sense will David rule Israel in the future (Ezekiel 34:23)?

It may surprise us that this Shepherd-King is identified as "my servant David" (Ezek. 34:23). Is God saying that David will be resurrected and rule Israel again? No, this is obviously a reference to Israel's Messiah, the descendant of David and a realization of the ideal shepherd rule to which David's reign pointed (cf. Jer. 23:5; Ezek. 37:24-25; Hos. 3:5). He will be the final fulfillment of the covenant that promised David an eternal kingdom and throne (2 Sam. 7:16).

It is twice stated in Ezekiel 34:23 that the task of this messianic "David" will be to "feed" God's people. As their Ruler, He will not exploit them. He will do what any shepherd should do for his sheep—provide sustenance for them. The Messiah will provide not only His people's physical needs but, more important, essentials for their spiritual life and growth (cf. Ps. 23:1-6; John 10:2-4, 10-11).

3. How can the image of Jesus as our shepherd give us comfort today?

Although many of Ezekiel's people lived in miserable exile in Babylon (Psalm 137), Ezekiel was able to lift their spirits with the prophecy of a Messiah who would be their loving shepherd. Unlike the wicked shepherds of Ezekiel's day, who took care of only themselves (Ezekiel 34:1-6), we know that our shepherd has our best interests at heart.

When we are weak and helpless, Jesus won't abandon us or take advantage of us; instead, He feels compassion for us (Matthew 9:36). A selfish shepherd makes sure

that his own needs are met (Jude 12). But Jesus, our shepherd, lovingly provides everything we need to live life and grow spiritually (2 Peter 1:3). Best of all, we can be confident that He cares for us because He was willing to lay down His life for us (John 10:11).

4. How will Christ be related to His Father in the future kingdom (v. 24)?

The role of Israel's Shepherd is now more precisely defined. It is the Lord (Yahweh) who will wield authority over Israel and receive their worship, and the Messiah will be "a prince among them." The term "my servant David" repeated here is appropriate for this role. Being one in nature with the Lord, He will always carry out His will in servantlike obedience. During His incarnation, Jesus repeatedly declared this obedience (John 4:34; 8:29). Even in His future messianic rule, He will submit Himself to His Father's will (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-28).

"I the Lord have spoken it" (Ezek. 34:24) gives the Lord's guarantee that He will fulfill this promise. For Jews in the Babylonian Captivity, the prophecy may have seemed wishful thinking on Ezekiel's part. But they could not lightly dismiss this solemn declaration of the Lord Himself.

PEACE WITH NATURE— Ezekiel 34:25-27a

5. What will happen to the animal kingdom during Messiah's rule (v. 25)?

Under the rule of Israel's Shepherd-King, God will establish with Israel "a covenant of peace." This covenant, enunciated in Leviticus 26:3-13, promised peace and prosperity to Israel in their own land in return for their obedience. The conditions it foretells will not prevail until Messiah rules.

As one aspect of this covenant, God "will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land" (Ezek. 34:25; cf. Lev. 26:6). This is one of several Old Testament prophecies that the animal kingdom will be transformed during Christ's millennial rule (cf. Isa. 11:6-9; 35:9; Hos. 2:18). As a result, people will dwell safely in the wild places and sleep in the woods free from all danger. God's people will no longer have to fear the predators of either desert or forest.

6. What economic conditions will prevail in Messiah's kingdom (vs. 26,27a)?

Israel's land will produce to its maximum capability, and the nation will be a blessing to its neighbors. "My hill" refers to Mount Zion in Jerusalem, and the places around it are simply the outlying fields and communities. The productivity of these areas will demonstrate that the Lord is blessing Israel, and others will seek His blessing as well (cf. Zech. 8:20-23).

What a contrast to the witness of the land in Ezekiel's own day! Then the land lay barren, desolate, and forsaken. Its condition elicited from outsiders not envy but astonishment and ridicule (cf. Jer. 18:16; 25:9; Lam. 2:15-16). In His anger, God had withdrawn His blessings. Only the redemption and repentance of Israel will restore its fruitfulness.

A key to the millennial prosperity will be timely rains to support the growth of crops (cf. Lev. 26:4). Historically often parched for lack of rain, the land will finally yield its produce as the Lord intended. Thus, the rains are called "showers of blessing" (Ezek. 34:26).

This expression may carry a hint of spiritual refreshment as well, for water sometimes symbolizes the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Isa. 44:3). As noted in last week's lesson, God promised spiritual renewal to Israel in the messianic age (Ezek. 11:19; cf. Isa. 32:15; Ezek. 39:29). This renewal is intimately connected with the new prosperity.

This presentation of agricultural abundance continues with the promise that *fruit* trees will always produce and the fields of *the earth* will yield good crops (Ezek.

34:27a). Even more important is the promise of safety. In ancient times crop production is long, tedious work. It is not unknown for enemies to sweep down at harvesttime and confiscate a community's food without having done any of the work. This leaves the farmers in a condition of famine (see Judges 6:11). In the prophesied kingdom of peace, there will be no danger from harvesttime marauders.

7. When was a time God showered you with blessings? What circumstances brought this about? What can we do to be more aware of blessings?

It's easy to become oblivious to the many ways that God blesses us each day. Often, the only time we are aware of our blessings is after we lose one of them. A healthy body is never appreciated more than after a prolonged time of illness.

Sometimes it is in the midst of suffering and trials that we are most aware that God is showering us with blessings. When we are grieving the loss of a loved one and our church family rallies round with cards, flowers, food, hugs, tears, and their comforting presence, we feel that God is showering us with blessings through our Christian friends. As we struggle under a financial burden and receive help for daily needs from a variety of sources, we praise God for the love He bestows on us. If we can begin to practice Paul's advice to give thanks in everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18), we can increase our ability to be grateful to God for all the ways He blesses our lives each day.

PROTECTION FROM DANGERS— Ezekiel 34:27b-29

8. How will Israel know God, and be viewed by their oppressors in the messianic age (v. 27b)?

The understanding of God's sovereignty will dawn upon the people when they experience their freedom from bondage. His protection involves, first, deliverance from those who once oppressed them. He will break "the bands of their yoke" (Ezek. 34:27). This expression was taken directly from Leviticus 26:13, where it referred to Israel's slavery in Egypt.

But Ezekiel applied the deliverance from Egypt to a more general deliverance from all Israel's oppressors. "Those that served themselves of them" (Ezek. 34:27) means those who benefited themselves through the services of the Israelites. Up to his day, this included neighboring peoples such as Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and Syrians, along with the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. Since that time it has included an even longer line of oppressors.

The time will come when all these enemies will be a thing of the past and Israel will be free of every cruel yoke. At that time the chosen nation will fully appreciate their God for who He is—the Lord (Yahweh).

9. How will Israel's future spiritual condition be related to the elimination of famines (vs. 28, 29)?

Israel's future is now summed up. Under Israel's Shepherd-King, "they shall no more be a prey to the heathen." In fact, the tables will be turned, and Israel will be predominant among the nations (cf. Deut. 28:13; Isa. 14:1-2; 60:10-14). With Messiah ruling from Jerusalem, the whole earth will come and pay homage to Him (Isa. 2:2-4; Zech. 8:20-23; 14:16).

Israel will also be preserved from internal perils (Ezek. 34:28). As already observed (v. 25), no wild animals will prey upon them. In ancient times their homeland was the haunt of lions, wolves, bears, leopards, and jackals, along with an assortment of snakes. These were always threats to human and animal life. In the messianic age, all such threats will be gone. "None shall make them afraid" generalizes the elimination of all perils, whether their source is animal or human.

Another peril that will be eliminated will be famine. The Lord "will raise up for them a plant of renown" (Ezek. 34:29). This expression has been variously interpreted. Some even take it to refer to the Messiah Himself, as in Isaiah 11:1 and Jeremiah 23:5. But since the con-text is related to material productivity, it probably means a planting place for crops that is renowned among the nations for its fruitfulness (Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel*, Moody).

Famines in Israel often resulted from the nation's waywardness (cf. Lev. 26:20, 26; Hos. 2:8-9; Hag. 1:5-6). Thus, famines advertised to the surrounding peoples that Israel was not being blessed by her God. These nations heaped ridicule on both the people of Israel and their God, assuming that He was powerless to provide for them. So disobedience had led to famines, and famines to disgrace.

In the coming messianic age, this disgrace will be gone. Israel will no longer "bear the shame of the heathen" (Ezek. 34:29). Respect, not humiliation, will be their lot. The root problem of sin will be eliminated, the soil will be liberated to produce abundantly, Israel will be exalted, and the Lord's name will be glorified through them.

PRESENCE OF THE LORD— Ezekiel 34:30-31

10. Why will future Israel better appreciate its covenant with God (v. 30)?

The presence of the Lord in the midst of His people is a theme of which the prophets spoke with wonder. Isaiah saw the Messiah as the glorious Branch of the Lord who, having sanctified Israel, will protect them as the cloud and fire had done in the wilderness (Isa. 4:2-6). Zechariah used similar imagery (Zech. 2:5) and spoke of the joyful singing that will break out when He comes to dwell in Jerusalem (vs. 10-11).

This future restoration and covenant of peace will be the ultimate sign of God's continuing promise to *Israel*, *God's people*. It is difficult to see all of these promises being fulfilled when some of the exiles are allowed to return to Jerusalem after 538 BC. At that time, the returnees experience harassment from surrounding peoples, crop failure, and a generally tenuous existence. Therefore, we must remember that there is a mixture in this passage of the hoped-for restoration of Jerusalem and the creation of the future messianic kingdom.

The same grace that preserves Israel for its future glory is extended to us as well. Jesus, the good Shepherd, both died for us and lives to keep us for Him-self (John 10:11-15, 27-29; Heb. 13:20-21). And when He returns, He will include us in His glory (1 Pet. 5:4).

11. How does God describe His relationship with us (v. 31)?

This prophetic word concludes by coming back to the language of sheep and shepherds. The relationship is clarified bluntly. Just as a shepherd cares for his *flock* of sheep, God cares for His flock of people. No reason is needed to justify this beyond God's declaration.

This is a statement of one of the most beautiful pictures of our relationship with God found in the Bible, a view that appears frequently. The psalmist writes, "We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (Psalm 95:7). Jesus applies the shepherd role to himself, for He teaches that He is "the good shepherd," willing to die for His sheep (John 10:11). Peter writes that Jesus continues this role even after His resurrection, for Christ remains as the shepherd of our souls (1 Peter 2:25).

Furthermore, Peter understands that the role of the Shepherd-Messiah will not be fully realized until Christ comes again. At that time we will see something more than agricultural abundance or safety. At that time, "the chief Shepherd" shall appear to award us a "crown of glory that fadeth not away" (1 Peter 5:4).

CONCLUSION

All people need protection and leadership. God provides both—in the short term through human leaders that He raises up but ultimately through the one Shepherd who is coming again.

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** Be assured—God always has a plan and will accomplish it despite what others may or may not do to advance or thwart it (Ezek. 34:23).
- 2.** What God promises, He will faithfully do; you can count on it (v. 24)!
- 3.** As Creator, Owner, and Sustainer of all, nothing and no one is outside God's sovereign control (vs. 25-26).
- 4.** When a person sees and knows that God is in control, he has no need to fear (vs. 27-28).
- 5.** For God's children, pain and suffering and trials and persecution are only temporary (v. 29).
- 6.** God always reveals Himself to His people at just the right time and in just the right way (vs. 30-31).

PRAYER

Loving God, when we read Ezekiel we can feel the anguish that the exiles must have felt in Babylon. We also see how You cared for them and preserved them.

We now better appreciate Your plan for a Messiah, one who comes to save us, feed us, and protect us. We love You for Your grace and Your care for us, given with an abundance that is beyond our ability to comprehend. We thank You for always being faithful, even as we return unfaithfulness for your faithfulness. We pray these things in the name of the shepherd of our souls, Jesus Christ. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God's future is one of abundance, safety, and peace.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Our lesson next week will help us explore how new life begins with God's Holy Spirit living and working within us. Study Ezekiel 36:22-32 "A New Spirit Within" in preparation.

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