

**A Flock with One Shepherd**  
**Ezekiel 34:1-24**

**PHBF 11.04.18**  
**Church Matters**

What would you say is the difference between a church and a gathering of Christians, say, at a Christian camp or weekend conference? What about a church vs. a Bible study or care group? Would it be appropriate for those groups to think of themselves as a mini-church?

The NT answers the question in terms of the metaphors it uses to describe the church. The church, as we've seen in this series, is a temple, a family, an outpost of God's kingdom, the body of Christ. These images demonstrate that the church is much more than a random gathering of Christians. Let's review what we've learned. I've tried to capture the essence of each of these images in a single word. Here's what a church is:

- God's new humanity = exhibit (of all the good things to come in God's new creation)
- Body of Christ = connection (interdependence, organic growth)
- Temple of God = transcendence (presence of God, worship, glory)
- Family of God = commitment (accountability, love, acceptance)
- Kingdom Outpost = mission (challenge the effects of sin's curse in all its forms: poverty, injustice, immorality)

This is what God says we are as a church. What an honor to be a church member. You are a part of God's new humanity, a member of His body, a stone in His temple, a child in His family, a citizen of His kingdom.

Today we come to one of the most common metaphors for the people of God in all the Scriptures. Literally hundreds of times, God refers to His people as sheep and Himself as a Shepherd. It's an illuminating image. In fact, I'd say it's the dominant image in my own mind, at least as it pertains to my calling. That I am a shepherd implies my own social standing (pretty unimportant) and my manner of life (faithful, hard work). That God's people are sheep implies they need to be led and fed. That the sheep are God's means He owns them (not I) and I must fulfill my calling for Him. It also sets a very clear and modest but eternally valuable goal for pastoral ministry—get Jesus' sheep home to Him.

Ezekiel 34 is the most extended description of this metaphor in the

Scriptures, so that's where we're going to spend most of our time.

Three very straightforward points:

- God's people are His flock.
- God's leaders are His shepherds.
- God's Messiah is the True Shepherd.

**God's People are His Flock.**

The image of God's people as a flock reaches way back into the OT with Israel, beginning with the period in the wilderness:

**Psalm 78:51-52** *He struck down every firstborn in Egypt, the firstfruits of their strength in the tents of Ham. <sup>52</sup> Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.*

It reappears dozens of times until it became a common way for the Jews to view themselves in their relationship with God:

**Psalm 100:3** *Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

It's an appropriate metaphor because God's people often act like sheep in many ways—foolish (known to get lost even within sight of the fold), defenseless (no claws, horns, venom, warning noise, wings, scales), tendency to stray (even from a pasture filled with food & water).

But more often, the primary point of the metaphor is NOT to describe something negative about human nature but to affirm something positive about God—namely, His tender care for His people, just like a shepherd cares for his sheep. That's the point of one of the most well-known passages in the Bible—the text Glenn read for us this morning:

**Psalm 23:1-4** *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. <sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. <sup>3</sup> He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. <sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Don't you yearn to know God this way? To be there in that scene, in His presence, leading and caring for you as your Shepherd? How meaningful then to hear God take those familiar words on His own lips and declare that this is what He will do for His people:

**Ezekiel 34:11-16** *For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. <sup>14</sup> I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. <sup>16</sup> 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.

This prophesy was written at a time when Jerusalem was about to fall. Ezekiel and many others had already been taken captive to Babylon and scattered among the other ancient nations. And God promises: “I’ll come get you. I’ll search for you like a shepherd. I’ll bring you home. I’ll feed you. I’ll make you lie down. I’ll heal you. I’ll be your Shepherd.”

The NT tells us this prophesy isn’t just for Israelites; it pertains to everyone who hears Jesus’ voice and follows Him. In other words, the formation of churches is a fulfillment of God’s promise to seek out His lost sheep, gather them to Himself, and oversee them (cf. Jer 23:3-4). We exist as a church because this is the kind of God we have. I wonder if that’s how you think of God, how you approach Him—as your gentle, caring, protective Shepherd.

**Isaiah 40:11** *[The Lord GOD] will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.*

In the ancient world, a flock of sheep was a precious thing. It was a reflection of wealth and a thing of beauty. This is why Solomon says to his bride:

**Song of Songs 4:1-2** *Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. <sup>2</sup> Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing...*

The image would have resonated with this young bride because she lived in a culture where a flock of sheep clustered on a green hillside was a pleasing sight. So with you, church: to say you are God’s flock means you are precious and valuable to Him. You belong to Him, and He

delights in you just as you are—a collection of needy, helpless sheep.

**Luke 12:32** *Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*

## God’s Leaders are His Shepherds.

One of the obvious implications of the flock metaphor is that God’s people need to be under authority. They need care, protection, feeding. As we mentioned earlier, sheep have a tendency to wander (cf. Is 53:6). Many times, the Scriptures describe God’s people like “sheep without a shepherd” (cf. Num 27:17, Mt 9:36). Zechariah prophesied that when you “strike the shepherd, the sheep will be scattered” (13:7). Even in the New Covenant, God’s people need to be under authority, and so God gives leaders to shepherd the flock on His behalf:

**1 Peter 5:1-2** *So I exhort the elders among you... <sup>2</sup> shepherd the flock of God that is among you...*

Why? Not only because sheep wander, but because the world isn’t a safe place. Wide open pastures can look harmless and inviting, and the sheep stroll around paying no attention. But the careful shepherd knows there’s danger out there:

**Acts 20:28-29** *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock...*

As Jim has said, a sheep without a shepherd is coyote bait. You need to be under the watchful care of shepherds. This is one key way we think of church membership—the group of people who have said to us, “We will follow you. Please watch over our souls.”

What is a church? **A church is a flock of sheep God has gathered to Himself under certain shepherds.** God entrusts His sheep to specially appointed pastors for their lifetime, and He expects these men to return His sheep someday well-fed and secure.

This is fundamentally what an elder is—a shepherd who watches over sheep. Often the bulk of our elders’ meetings falls into the category of “pastoral care”—discussing the needs of our members and how we can care for them. This is why we endeavor to proactively visit all of our members during the course of the year—because God has given us

these sheep of His to guard, and we are responsible to make sure we get them home to Him.

This is why we always need more elders, but it's also why we are careful and slow in the process we follow to appoint them. We need to distinguish true shepherds from hirelings, thieves, strangers. The fortunes of the sheep depend upon the character of their shepherd:

**Ezekiel 34:1-5** *The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup> "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? <sup>3</sup> You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup> The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. <sup>5</sup> So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts."*

One of God's common concerns was that Israel's shepherds hadn't cared for His people the way He expected them to. What happened? They forgot whose sheep they were tending. In God's flock, the sheep do not belong to the shepherd; they belong to God:

**Ezekiel 34:6-10** *My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. <sup>7</sup> "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: <sup>8</sup> As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, <sup>9</sup> therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: <sup>10</sup> 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.*

Wise pastors always remember God's ownership of the church. Paul said to the Ephesian elders: "Care for the flock of God which He obtained with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). Jesus said to Peter: "Feed MY sheep" (Jn 20:15-17). Peter says to all elders: "Shepherd the flock of God." The sheep do not exist for the benefit of the shepherds; shepherds exist to serve the sheep. Pastors who lose sight of this aren't shepherds anymore. There is a name for shepherds who stop feeding sheep and instead use sheep to feed themselves. We call them wolves:

**Acts 20:29-30** *I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

So how can you tell the wolves from the real shepherds?

**Jeremiah 3:14-15** *...I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. <sup>15</sup> And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.*

Real shepherds are men "after God's own heart." They teach the word of God. They draw people's attention to God. They rely on the strength of God. They model their own ministry after the tenderness and faithfulness of God. They seek the approval of God. They lead and feed and protect the sheep for God.

### God's Messiah is the True Shepherd.

God knows that even the best shepherds are going to fall short of what the sheep need. That's why we should all be thankful for the promise of at the end of our text:

**Ezekiel 34:23-24** *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. <sup>24</sup> And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.*

David was the iconic shepherd of Israel, the greatest leader God's people had ever known. So God promised to bring back this shepherd-king to "feed them, be their shepherd, and be prince among them." He's talking, of course, about the Messiah. When the Messiah came, he would treat the people as the shepherd they always needed.

**Micah 5:4** *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.... <sup>4</sup> And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.*

A "ruler" who is also a "shepherd." It's a dual image that begins with David and runs through the whole Scripture. Of course, we know it's a picture fulfilled in David's greater son, Jesus of Nazareth. ***Jesus' kingly power is always congruous with His shepherd status.***

One of the most obvious implications of the flock metaphor is FOLLOWING: Your shepherd is the one whom you follow. If Jesus is your shepherd, you follow Him. He speaks, and you obey. Jesus said: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them; and they follow me.” Are you following?

The shepherd image for Jesus tends to coalesce with the king image:

**Matthew 2:6** *And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.*

The book of Revelation refers to Jesus several times ruling the nations “with a rod of iron.” Interestingly, that verb is “poimen”—the one rendered everywhere else as “shepherd.” Jesus is a shepherd who doesn’t just feed and protect and lead. He reigns! Follow Him.

This is a message especially important for sheep. Why? because we wander. Tend not to follow. Go our own way. We’re not just gullible; we’re guilty. Because we’re not just sheep; we’re human beings who make choices that God holds us responsible for. Our wandering isn’t just foolish; it’s wrong.

One of the most precious aspects of the image is the way Jesus embodied His people as sheep (cf. Is 53)-- Embodies the sheep by taking their wandering on Himself and dying in their place

**Isaiah 53:6-7** *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.*

We and our Savior are both like sheep—He in the best way and we in the worst. Verse 6 says we wander off with sheep-like foolishness, willfully moving from one tempting morsel of grass to the next. In verse 7 He surrenders himself with lamb-like innocence, mild and defenseless, to the slaughter. Same nature, but in us that nature is foolish and self-destructive while in Him it is meek and redeeming.

**John 10:11** *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*