

STUDY 5

Sheep without a Shepherd

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The language of shepherds and flock is expressive of the rule of God. When God indicated to Moses that his life was soon to end, Moses asked God to select someone to succeed him as Israel's leader, 'that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd' (Num. 27:17).¹ It was important that the people of God be shepherded by God through the agency of under-shepherds appointed by him and accountable to him for their leadership and care of the flock.

THE TERM 'SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD' DENOTES THE REJECTION OF GOD'S RULE

When Ahab was king of Israel he invited Jehoshaphat the king of Judah to go out with him to make war on Syria. Jehoshaphat's political enthusiasm led him immediately to express accord with the king of Israel. But then he belatedly suggested that they 'Inquire first for the word of the LORD' (1 Kings 22:5). We notice that when Jehoshaphat called for a prophet, the name of God, Yahweh, is indicated by the capitalisation of 'LORD'. Four hundred prophets were summoned who all agreed that the kings should attack the Syrians. 'Go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king', they said. Here we note that the name of Yahweh is not indicated by the prophets, and this would be in accord with the syncretism which Ahab had introduced into Israel. But Jehoshaphat was not satisfied and persisted in asking, 'Is there not here another prophet of the LORD of whom we may inquire?' The prophet Micaiah was identified as such a prophet who had repeatedly resisted the king's attitude towards not doing the will of the LORD. They found Micaiah who, after being coerced to speak what he knew, said:

I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, 'These have no master; let each return to his home in peace' (1 Kings 22:17).

Micaiah's prophetic vision was shocking. Israel, 'scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd'. Did they not have a king (or two kings!), and was not national religion in place with four hundred prophets in attendance. But in the sight of God the people of God were living as those who 'have no master'.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the English Standard Version.

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The term, 'sheep without a shepherd', thus takes on an important meaning in the history of God's people. It reappears in the New Testament. When Jesus looked out upon the crowd of Israelites he saw that 'they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Matt. 9:36).

Domesticated Animals in the Wild!

The term, 'harassed and helpless', could quickly be passed over, a bit like 'a bad hair day'. But something vitally significant is indicated here for the people of God. We know that even when a normally wild animal is domesticated for a while, say for the purposes of recovery from injury, it can be very vulnerable when it is released again into the wild. Much more so when a domestic animal, for example a sheep, bred and cared for under human husbandry for countless generations is suddenly loose in the wild, its chances of survival are minimal indeed. Likewise, when the flock of God is separated from its Shepherd, and scattered rather than gathered together, it is in mortal danger. Human beings are not wild sheep that have been domesticated. Rather they were created for domesticity that they might abide as the household of God in the garden of God's presence. Their Shepherd cries out:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:

'Children have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.

³ The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.'

⁴ Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged.

⁵ Why will you still be struck down?
Why will you continue to rebel?
The whole head is sick,
and the whole heart faint.

⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
and raw wounds;
they are not pressed out or bound up
or softened with oil.

⁷ Your country lies desolate;
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
foreigners devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.

⁸ And the daughter of Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,
like a lodge in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city.

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⁹ If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we should have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah (Isa. 1:2–9).

Death Shall Be Their Shepherd

To be ‘sheep without a shepherd’, then, is to be like fat chickens that have escaped the chook house at night and fled into the fox-ridden scrub! Foxes love to eat fat chickens, and the evil one loves to devour succulent saints who have gone astray from their Shepherd-God. As an ex-sheep farmer and shearer, I know that sheep are actually smarter than people generally think. Except that is, when they break away, then they become utterly disorientated, fearful and foolish, and rush headlong into danger:

You shall say to them, Thus says the LORD:
When men fall, do they not rise again?

If one turns away, does he not return?

⁵ Why then has this people turned away
in perpetual backsliding?

They hold fast to deceit;
they refuse to return.

⁶ I have paid attention and listened,
but they have not spoken rightly;
no man relents of his evil,
saying, ‘What have I done?’

Everyone turns to his own course,
like a horse plunging headlong into battle.

⁷ Even the stork in the heavens
knows her times,
and the turtledove, swallow, and crane
keep the time of their coming,
but my people know not
the rules of the LORD (Jer. 8:4–7).

When the flock of God become ‘sheep without a shepherd’, they become bereft of divine wisdom and assume a ‘foolish confidence’ that all will be well. As we say here in Australia, ‘She’ll be right mate!’ But ‘Death shall be their shepherd’, and in the world of the dead there will be ‘no place to dwell’ safely:

¹³ This is the path of those who have foolish confidence;
yet after them people approve of their boasts.

¹⁴ Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;
Death shall be their shepherd,
and the upright shall rule over them in the morning.
Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no
place to dwell (Ps. 49:13–14).

The prophets used every vivid metaphor to convey, in the most arresting terms, the peril of being sheep without a shepherd. ‘Death shall be their shepherd’! Is this not the preacher’s task today, to warn those ‘who go astray in their heart’ (Ps. 95:10; cf. Heb. 3:10), to warn in the starkest of terms as to the implications of being apart from the Shepherd-God.

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The Lord will not be their Shepherd; they shall want. He will not make them lie down in green pastures. He will not lead them beside still waters. He will not restore their souls. He will not lead them in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. When they walk through the valley of the shadow of death, they will fear all evil, for he will not be with them; his rod and his staff will not comfort them. He will not prepare a table before them in the presence of their enemies; he will not anoint their head with oil; their cup will not run over. Goodness and mercy will not follow them all the days of their lives and they will not dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Ps. 23).

We need 'the Shepherd and Overseer of [our] souls' (1 Pet. 2:25), and to be apart from him, like 'sheep without a shepherd', is the ultimate peril.

BAD SHEPHERDS AND SCATTERED SHEEP

Critical to this study is God's account of the under-shepherds of Israel in Ezekiel 34:

The word of the LORD came to me: ²'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? ³You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴The 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' (Ezek. 34:1-4).

We note that, from God's point of view, to have bad shepherds is akin to having 'sheep without a shepherd' and the results are disastrous:

So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. ⁶My 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 (Ezek. 34:5-6).

When 'there was no shepherd', three things resulted, which are important for us to observe.

The first was that the sheep were 'scattered over all the face of the earth'. Scattering in ancient sheep husbandry is a perfect metaphor for a perilous circumstance for the flock of God. Scattered sheep are separated from the care of their shepherd, and individually separated from the strength and security of the gathered flock. They are in constant peril, and can be picked off, one by one.

Secondly, 'they became food for all the wild beasts'. Anyone who has seen a flock that has been ravaged by wild dogs or other predators will know that it is a sad and sorry sight. Thus was Israel when she was not shepherded in the name of God:

Israel is a hunted sheep driven away by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured him, and now at last Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has gnawed his bones (Jer. 50:17).

From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
and raw wounds;
they are not pressed out or bound up
or softened with oil (Isa. 1:6).

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Satan earnestly desires to destroy the flock of God. He is ‘the thief’ who ‘comes only to steal and kill and destroy’ (John 10:10). A bad under-shepherd in the flock of God is like ‘a hired hand and not a shepherd’:

He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep (John 10:12–13).

The people of God are protected from the evil one by the covering blood of atonement. In Exodus 12:23 it is the angel of death that is the Destroyer:

By faith he [i.e. Moses] kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them (Heb. 11:28).

In 1 Corinthians 5:5 it is Satan who is the agent of destruction:

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord (1 Cor. 5:4–5).

Either way the flock of God needs to be with their Shepherd and under his atoning blood-covering if they are to avoid destruction. To be ‘sheep without a shepherd’ is to be apart from ‘the good shepherd’ who ‘lays down his life for the sheep’ (John 10:11). Using another metaphor, it is to refuse to be gathered for divine protection:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! (Matt. 23:37).

The third consequence of there being ‘no shepherd’ was that there was no one willing ‘to search or seek for them’. When shepherding breaks down in the flock of God and the sheep are scattered, lost and ravaged, then good shepherding requires searching for the lost and bringing them back. We will return to this theme a little later.

‘I MYSELF WILL SEARCH FOR MY SHEEP’

At the time of Ezekiel, God’s response to his people being sheep without a shepherd was twofold: He would shepherd them himself, and he would send his servant David to shepherd them. In Ezekiel 34 we see a wonderful truth, namely, that God takes ultimate responsibility for the shepherding of his people. While his discipline of the bad shepherds was being played out, he himself would shepherd his people:

For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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 (Ezek. 34:11–14).

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It is an interesting word study to look up all the occurrences of the words ‘I will’ in the Bible (there are over 1,600). In the vast majority of cases it is God who speaks, thus revealing through his prophets his heart and his sovereign action. In the chapter on shepherding (Ezek. 34) we notice that no less than twenty times God says, ‘I will . . .’

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I 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 (Ezek. 34:15–16).

The implications of this truth for the people of God today are encouraging. Though bad shepherding has resulted in many scattering, it does not mean that God’s shepherding of his people is thwarted. Jesus gave the same assurance when he revealed himself as the awaited ‘good shepherd’. The good shepherd and his Father both have a very strong grip, and no one can snatch out of their hands:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand (John 10:27–29).

‘My Servant David Will Feed Them’

The second response that God made to the bad shepherds of Ezekiel’s time was to foretell the sending of ‘the good shepherd’:

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. ²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken (Ezek. 34:23–24).

King David, of course, had been dead many centuries and God was pointing on to Messiah, the son of David. Jesus’ declaration that he was ‘the good shepherd’ in John 10 was not a spur of the moment use of a familiar metaphor—‘I am like a good sheep farmer who looks after his sheep properly’. Jesus was declaring that he was God’s ‘servant David’ foretold in Ezekiel 34 and other places. He was contrasting himself with the bad shepherds or ‘hired hands’ of Ezekiel’s time and also of his own day. Unlike the hired hand ‘who cares nothing for the sheep’, Jesus was moved deeply by the condition of the flock of God:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36).

He ‘began to teach them many things’ (Mark 6:34) and, overall, his ministry is that of a shepherd after God’s own heart as that shepherding heart of God had been revealed by the prophets:

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 (Ezek. 34:16).

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He 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 (Isa. 40:11).

Nevertheless the Israelites retained their own ideas of kingship and wanted to coerce Jesus into fulfilling them:

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself (John 6:15).

LOST SHEEP AND SEARCHING SHEPHERD

Those sheep who are without a shepherd are 'lost sheep', who have been led astray, and have forgotten their fold:

My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains. From mountain to hill they have gone. They have forgotten their fold (Jer. 50:6).

It is very important for us to see that one of the glaring characteristics of the bad shepherds is that, when the sheep have strayed, become lost and are in peril, the bad shepherds do not go looking for them to bring them back. Bad shepherds do not go looking for lost sheep! The Lord lamented over his flock, 'My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them' (Ezek. 34:6). As well as protecting and providing, good shepherding always has a restorative aspect.

The bad shepherds of Israel failed in this most godly of functions:

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 (Ezek. 34:4).

God's response to Israel being 'scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them' (Ezek. 34:6), was that God himself would 'seek the lost, and . . . bring back the strayed' (Ezek. 34:16).

God loved his flock, Israel, and when Jesus came he 'was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt. 15:24). He came to them from their Shepherd-God to announce that his kingdom was near at hand. He fed them and bound up their wounds. He also sent his disciples to go to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. They were to have the same restorative function for those of the flock who were harassed and helpless: 'Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons' (Matt. 10:5-8).

Jesus was invited to settle for a while in a place where his ministry was being appreciated. But he declined, saying, 'I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose' (Luke 4:43). He must have walked hundreds of kilometres looking for lost sheep:

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a

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shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest’ (Matt. 9:35–38).

It was in one of these towns, Jericho, that Jesus found a lost sheep up a tree. That very day salvation came to Zacchaeus’s house because the Son of Man, the good shepherd, ‘came to seek and to save the lost’ (Luke 19:9–10). There were many in Israel who were lost sheep, and the good shepherd went after them, found them, and gathered them together. In so doing he incurred the wrath of the bad shepherds:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’ ³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ ‘What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance’ (Luke 15:1–7).

Right up to the conclusion of his earthly ministry Jesus ‘went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem’ (Luke 13:22). Having trudged around Palestine for three years searching for and finding lost sheep, last of all he found one hanging on the cross next to his own.

SHEPHERDS AFTER GOD’S OWN HEART

Joy in heaven is joy indeed! Heaven’s joy is pure, full of meaning, and eternally lasting. There is joy in heaven ‘over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance’. But there is more joy and great rejoicing ‘over one sinner who repents’. When the good shepherd comes home, carrying a lost sheep, he calls upon all saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost’. As I grow older, and my flesh feels like it wants to set like concrete, I ask myself, ‘Do I still rejoice with the good shepherd when he finds one of his sheep that was lost?’ It is right that I should continually ask myself, ‘Am I still a shepherd after God’s own heart?’