

*The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.'" Ezekiel 34:1-6*

We know from the context of this passage that Ezekiel is not speaking of literal shepherds, but rather he is speaking to the spiritual shepherds of Israel. And since Israel was to be a theocratic kingdom, the spiritual shepherds of Israel included all who had a share in the governing of the nation, whether that person was a prophet, or a priest, or a king.

When you think of the rulers of Israel, the people we think of today as "secular leaders" -- people like Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David and Solomon -- you are also thinking of the *spiritual* leaders of Israel. These people had a share in the writing of sacred Scripture. Some even occupied the office of prophet. There was no distinction between "secular" and "spiritual" in ancient Israel. In 2 Samuel 5:2 we learn that the Lord came to David and said, "You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler." David's roll as a shepherd or a spiritual guide was inseparable from his role as a ruler.

The metaphor of the shepherd as spiritual leader has been taken up so completely in the Judaeo-Christian tradition that the New Testament simply refers to spiritual leaders as "pastors," which originally meant "shepherds." And based on this passage in Ezekiel, we can see that the problem of abusive shepherds goes back literally thousands of years. Notice especially Ezekiel 34:4: "You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally."

This was a terrible indictment against the prophets, priests and governing officials of Israel in Ezekiel's day. It was their job to strengthen the spiritually weak, heal the spiritually sick, and bind up the spiritually injured. It was their job to bring back the strays and search for the lost.

Notice also that this prophecy was delivered during an era that was permeated with a sense of God's wrath. They were under the Law, with all its prohibitions and penalties. Even so, theirs was not to be a ministry of condemnation, harshness and brutality, but rather strengthening, healing and binding. For them, refusing to do so alone constituted spiritual abuse, according to Ezekiel.

As if it wasn't enough to merely neglect those spiritual duties, they went even further to oppress their people, for Ezekiel says, "You have ruled them harshly and brutally." These abusers were more interested in what they had to gain from ruling over others, than in being a spiritual benefit to others. For them, it wasn't about actually being a shepherd or fulfilling a calling ... according to Ezekiel, it was all about control.

But Ezekiel isn't finished denouncing the fruit of these shepherds' so-called ministry. He wants them to know -- and he wants us to know -- that both the *neglect* of

the sheep, and the *abuse* of the sheep directly resulted in the *wandering* of the sheep. Verse 5 says, "So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals." That's what happens in spiritually abusive situations!

Verse 6 tells us: "My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill." Those who cannot bear up under the harsh treatment often simply wander away -- they can't take it anymore. One day they're there, the next day they're gone. And do the leaders care? Are they upset about this fact? Ezekiel says, "They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them."

But this is exactly what we feel called to do. This is our mission! To search for those who have wandered away from the fold. To find those who are hurting and confused. And to love them back to spiritual health.

God is doing something new and exciting in His church and we are privileged to be on the cutting edge of something that I believe will be awesome. We are just now beginning to see the fruit of our labor in this ministry. There is a large army of God's people that have been neglected but I believe they will rise again and do great exploits in His name. There is nothing like finding a hurting lamb and helping them find their way home. Seeing them healed and restored and becoming what God intended for them to be. We invite you to partner with us in this exciting and fulfilling work!