

# ***“God’s Resilience”***

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***“The divine preference for human agency is amazingly resilient.” (Tim Laniak)***

***Ezekiel 34:7-16***

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at [corinthtoday.org/sermons](http://corinthtoday.org/sermons).)

## ***What you might not know about sheep***

I’ve been reading about sheep and talking about sheep in Bible studies all week, including conversation with Corinth’s own real-live modern day shepherd, Shane Snyder. He and Dana raise about 30 sheep on their Caldwell County farm.

Here are some facts about sheep you might not know.

1. *Not all sheep have wool.* Shane and Dana raise “hair sheep,” which provide meat but their “hair” isn’t useful for shearing and spinning into fabric.
2. *Sheep are not stupid.* God has simply hardwired sheep’s brains to operate differently, hardwired perfectly for the unique roles they play.
3. *Sheep ruminates.* Sheep, like cows, giraffes, llamas, and goats, have four stomachs. One of them is called the “rumen,” which is like a fermentation vat where millions of bacteria break down the food. When a sheep is under stress (under attack or on the move), this “rumination” can’t function properly. A sheep needs quiet rest to chew the cud and ruminate.
4. *Sheep are not very empathetic.* When facing danger, they run as a flock and leave behind the weak and vulnerable. When an ewe bears three lambs, she will nurse two of them and let the runt of the litter starve.
5. *Sheep have little natural defense.* Most sheep don’t bite or kick or butt or run very fast. They can’t climb trees or fly or fight back well. They are particularly vulnerable when, while exercising the very normal instinct to find food, they wander off by themselves. They can get caught in a thicket or a thunderstorm or the jaws of a predator. They are also easily bullied by goats, donkeys, or even the strongest rams. It’s why they need shepherds.

The reason we don't know much about sheep is that, at best, most of us are several steps away from direct contact with them. Wool clothing is less common or essential because synthetic fibers are cheaper and tend to cause fewer irritations. If you eat a lamb chop, it's probably not your everyday food.

By contrast, sheep-related words (sheep, flock, shepherd, lamb, etc.) are found **more than 600 times** in the Bible, in about two-thirds of the books of the Bible. You can easily recall some of those references – Psalm 23:1, where King David said, “The LORD is my shepherd,” John 10, where Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd,” and Luke 2, where angels announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds.

While some ancient cultures disdained shepherds, Jewish people honored them. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David were all shepherds before they became patriarchs and leaders. The Jews were not alone among ancient cultures in comparing their kings and priests to shepherds for the people. It was a favorable analogy.

As familiar and common as the shepherd metaphor is in the Bible, it's not at all surprising to see it take center stage in one of Ezekiel's chapters. He loves theater and mime and vivid word pictures. Ezekiel 34 is so parallel to Jeremiah 23 that many scholars believe Ezekiel read what Jeremiah said and simply expanded on the theme.

### ***Unfaithful shepherds, untended sheep (Ezekiel 34:1-10)***

We have moved into the hopeful part of Ezekiel's prophecy. Jerusalem has fallen (33:21), an event that the Jewish people of Ezekiel's generation had believed to be not only improbable but impossible. Now it's time for words of promise and restoration.

It doesn't feel like that as you begin reading Ezekiel 34, especially if you're one of Israel's leaders. Don't read it through their lens; read it through that of the people. Read it the same way a Russian commoner heard the news of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, or the Jews when the Third Reich fell, the Iraqis after Saddam Hussein. The beginning of Ezekiel 34 is about false “shepherds” who exploited the people.

You might sense a certain irony in Ezekiel's rebuke of the shepherds for their self-serving behavior. Didn't shepherds care for sheep so that they could be sheared for wool or slaughtered for sacrifice or meat? Well, yes and no. In most cases, the shepherds didn't own the sheep; they were stewards of someone else's sheep.

Even though they're not his property, a faithful shepherd bonds with the sheep. He watches for those who wander off. He notices those who are sick or wounded. He personally feeds the runt that is rejected by its mother. The sheep trust him; they know his voice and come when he calls. He vigilantly watches for predators. He knows when sheep need to find pasture or fresh water. He knows when they need to eat and when they need to ruminate. He even knows them by name and calls them. On most days the shepherd-sheep connection feels more personal than the owner-sheep bond.

What we have in the first ten verses of Ezekiel 34 is a severe indictment of the kings and priests of Israel and Judah who had forgotten or willfully neglected their role as under-shepherds. Like a shepherd who would slaughter the best sheep out in the field for his dinner while neglecting the wanderers and weak, the leaders of Israel had exploited the people for their own comfort. Their sheep had been abused and neglected (4), plundered and scattered (8).

Every single Jew in the ancient world fully understood the gravity in this metaphor. Sheep scatter when they are neglected or unprotected. Any shepherd who allows that to happen deserves all the judgment and wrath the owner brings on their heads. To Ezekiel's original readers, this indictment felt the same as we feel when we hear a coach has sexually abused young people, or an orphanage has sold the orphans into slavery, or an accountant has embezzled from the firm.

Leadership, especially delegated leadership, is a heavy burden. When you accept the mantle, you are not only accepting the care of people and resources, you are embracing accountability to the owner. In every generation and society leaders have neglected, exploited, and abused those they lead. Ezekiel calls them out.

### ***The LORD is my shepherd (Ezekiel 34:11-17)***

What's the hopeful message in Ezekiel 34? It is the message that the "sovereign LORD" is going to fire the unfaithful shepherds and take personal charge of his flock. We met this "sovereign LORD" (Yahweh Elohim) in all his glory in the visions of chapters 1 and 10. He sees all and knows all and controls all. We saw his glory and his throne.

The story of Starbucks, the coffee chain, illustrates this principle. Howard Schulz founded the company as we know it in 1988, and served as CEO until 2000 as the company expanded into a worldwide and very profitable venture. At that time, he stepped back from operations. Eight years later, when sales were declining at most outlets except the newest stores, Schulz returned as CEO, fired many executives, closed hundreds of weak stores permanently, and closed all stores long enough to retrain employees in making espresso. Sometimes the big guy has to take charge again.

In Ezekiel 34, the owner (God) will personally resume the duties of shepherd. Here's what the Lord says he will do for his neglected, scattered, and abused people –

- "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them" (11).
- "I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness" (12), a reference to the fall of Jerusalem.
- "I will bring them out from the nations and...into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines, and in all the settlements in the land" (13).
- "I will tend them in a good pasture. They will lie down in good grazing land, and...will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel" (14).

- “I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down” (15).
- “I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. The sleek and strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice” (16).

The chapter continues after the end of our reading in verse 16, with more of what God will do. He expands on the inter-flock abuse. It wasn’t just the “shepherds” (kings and priests) who were abusing the people; they were abusing each other. He is going to step with judgment. The end result will be safety, prosperity and even fame.

The metaphor switches a little at the end of the chapter, but it’s still agricultural. The land has experienced drought and therefore scarcity in the crops. There will be “showers of blessing” (26), a phrase familiar to me because of a hymn written in 1883.<sup>1</sup>

The main point in Ezekiel 34 that God is firing the under-shepherds and taking personal control of his flock. How, exactly, does God do that? It makes sense for the CEO of Starbucks to resume direct management, but how does God step in to feed and guide and protect the flock? Verse 23 offers a hint as the Lord says, “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them and be their shepherd.”

### ***God’s resilience***

In my preaching through Ezekiel, I have focused our attention each week on what Ezekiel teaches us about God. “This God is our God,” as Psalm 48 says. Whenever you’re not sure exactly what is happening anywhere in the pages of the Bible or how it relates to you, a good question to ask is usually, “What does this teach me about God?”

That approach is helpful to me in studying Ezekiel, not only when the message is judgment for Israel’s sins – because America is not Israel and the judgment on Israel in 586 B.C. was unique – but when Ezekiel turns in chapter 34 to hope and restoration.

Christians have read these promises of restoration in three primary ways.

- When the Lord says in 34:13, “I will bring them into their own land,” many Jews and Christians have connected it to Israel literally returning home – either in the fifth century BC or in the 20<sup>th</sup> century AD. That verse figures prominently in the debate over today’s Israeli borders.
- Another stream of interpretation spiritualizes the return and restoration of Israel as referring to the church. We are the promise fulfilled.
- There’s also a strong tradition of seeing this, in connection with other Scriptures, as a picture of the future millennial kingdom on earth. When God takes charge, he appoints his “servant David” to be the new Shepherd. Since Ezekiel was written at least four hundred years after the

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<sup>1</sup> I tried to find out more about the hymn, but all we seem to know is that the author eschewed fame and credit. His name was Daniel Webster (1840-1901), but he normally used one of several pseudonyms.

reign of King David in Jerusalem, this must be the future David, the Messiah. Jesus will set up an earthly kingdom for a thousand years.

It may or may not surprise you that I do not feel the need to take a position on that issue – not this week and not our final two weeks in Ezekiel. The good news is that if one of those positions is important to you, I also don't feel any need to correct you.

I want to focus on who God is and what he is like in Ezekiel 34. What I see is a shepherd's heart. A shepherd loves and seeks and feeds and protects and guides. A shepherd is always thinking about what's best for the sheep. King David, the consummate shepherd in the Bible, ruminated so much on this subject that he wrote, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. I will fear no evil."

### ***God's resilience***

But how exactly does God personally shepherd? Fifteen years ago, during and after my doctoral work at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in Charlotte, one of my primary mentors was Dr. Tim Laniak. He spent a full year's sabbatical among Bedouin shepherds in Israel and Jordan, then published two books on sheep and shepherds. The most memorable line from those books for me comes toward the end of his chapter on Ezekiel: "The divine preference for human agency is amazingly resilient" (*Shepherds After My Own Heart*, 160). God does directly and unmistakably intervene at points in the biblical story, but those interventions are rare and usually brief. What God does when shepherds fail, is to remove them – and then replace them with other shepherds.

Look at John 10 through this lens. Jesus was making a direct reference to Ezekiel 34 when he said, "I am the good shepherd" (11). This is the parallel in John's gospel to what he says more often in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: "The kingdom of God is here." The shepherd of whom Ezekiel spoke – the direct leadership and provision and protection of God – is here. I'm taking back my flock. Being a follower of Jesus is not just saying a prayer so you can get into heaven. It is the sheep-life with the shepherd.

The Jews reacted to his claim, saying he was "demon-possessed and raving mad" (20). It wasn't just that he was claiming to be Yahweh, the Good Shepherd. It was also his statement that he as a good shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep. A dead Messiah was to them – and to most Jews today – an oxymoron.

Having staked his claim as Messiah and King and Shepherd, Jesus tells his disciples the night before he dies, "I'm leaving you, and you can't follow me – not yet. So I'm giving you the Holy Spirit." But how does the Holy Spirit shepherd? "The divine preference for human agency is amazingly resilient." Mostly, he shepherds through us.

Jesus shepherds people today by what we're doing here right now. You do know, right, that the word "pastor" means "shepherd"? It is encouraging, humbling,

and terrifying to me to say that – because of what Ezekiel 34 says about shepherds who only feed themselves while exploiting or ignoring the vulnerable, lost, and weak.

One of my great burdens as a pastor is concern for those who feel neglected or overlooked in the flock for which God holds me accountable. When someone feels overlooked by the church or me as the pastor, I have three responses.

1. I want to know. I share my cell phone and email address so I can be available.
2. I hate it. It's not only because of my responsibility as shepherd, but because over the years God has transformed the heart of someone who wasn't hardwired with empathy. It hurts to know we've let you down.
3. I want a chance to try again. While the downside of a growing church is that the pastor can't personally shepherd everyone, the benefit is a whole army of shepherds. We call our shepherds by various names – pastors, staff, elders, small group leaders, Sunday School teachers, mentors, Stephen Ministers, and more.

I share those three responses because they are parallel to what I believe the Chief Shepherd would say to those who feel neglected by him. I know there are those who, when they hear the Lord saying, "I will be their shepherd," think or even say, "Well, he hasn't shepherded me. I'm one of those who constantly asks for help or even a sense of his presence, and I get nothing." We need to remember that...

1. He knows. The Chief Shepherd is not like me, needing a cell phone or email address. This all-seeing God, despite the way it feels, fully knows.
2. He grieves. If I as an under-shepherd hurt for those who feel neglected, how much more does the Lord? God became man so that we could never say, "He doesn't know what it's like to experience weakness or pain or rejection or suffering or even death." He not only knows all things; he has experienced our trials and temptations.
3. He's resilient. We want to know why we have to face these trials. Most often I have to admit that I don't know. Those who have come through on the other end tell me they became aware God was redirecting them, or reshaping them, or calling them to fresh dependence on him, or possibly even just equipping them to shepherd others. What I do know is that God will keep looking, seeking, finding, helping – even if he has to fire your current shepherds and assign you new ones.

With God and you, it's always personal. If David, a thousand years before Christ came, could write about the reality and presence of the Lord as his shepherd, how much more can we who have the Holy Spirit living in us? We are never alone. Through Christ, the connection with the Father in heaven is direct and immediate. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Amen.