

Allan MacRae, Ezekiel: Lecture 11

"I will bring them out of nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own lands" (Ezek. 34:13). Now I think up to this point we certainly have this decision of God's dealing with all his sheep, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Be sure of that. He starts with that fact. But now he said, "I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries; I will bring them to their own land." Is he saying that he is going to take to heaven all those who truly are his sheep, or is he just speaking of a literal gathering of the people who were in exile only, for whom Ezekiel was written? I think we must say that here is a regathering of Israel, undoubtedly, but I don't think we can rule out the possibility that Ezekiel is going beyond that and speaking concerning all his sheep and that he is going to bring them out, bring them in to wherever he wants them to be. In the end, if we truly belong to him, we can know that he is our shepherd, for we say, "The lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Ps. 23). He is delivering a promise for all his people. So we must say there is a definite relation to Ezekiel's time here, but also looking forward to include all the Lord's sheep.

Now he said, "I will tend them in a good pasture and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed on the rich pastures on the mountains of Israel" (Ezek. 34:14). Knowing he speaks specifically of the mountains of Israel, surely you realize the primary emphasis is on bringing people back from the exile. Ezekiel is speaking to those in exile when he says, "You or your children are going to be brought back to Israel," so there is a specific promise to Israel, a promise to be fulfilled when Cyrus makes a decree that any Israelite who wishes to go back to Jerusalem can go. However, the size of the group compared to the whole group was small that actually returned to the country of Israel.

Chapter 34, verse 16, says, "I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy." Now right there is a powerful verse: "But the sleek and the

strong I will destroy." If only you are weak and you are helpless, God will take care of you, but if you're strong enough to stand up on your own two feet, then you know he's going to destroy you. But that doesn't fit from the reading of the Scripture as a whole. So I think we have to try to interpret that in light of broader scriptural principles, and say that there are those who are using their strength for their own benefit only, and in a way that is harmful to others. It is those whom God is going to destroy. But he does not mean here that all of the sleek or all of the strong he is going to actually destroy without qualification. Apparently they are using their strength for their own benefit and not for the benefit of other people.

Ezekiel continues, "I will shepherd the flock with justice" (Ezek. 34:16). Here he enters into another idea. He was talking about the shepherd, now he's talking about the flock. "I'm going to judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats" (Ezek. 34:17). I'm sure any farmer would like to have rams, and he'd like to have goats, he doesn't want to destroy all the goats and just have the rams; both are important. Here he is not talking of the shepherds, but of the sheep themselves, and it shows us that we cannot blame the shepherd for our limitations or our own selfishness. God knows that the shepherds are responsible for some things, but we must recognize that we have a responsibility, too. God still sees the influences that come into our lives and the attitudes of others that injure us. God will punish them for that, but we cannot cast on each other the blame for our own failings and for our own selfishness. He will judge among the people. The Shepherd's influences come into our lives, and they are tremendously important, but we have a responsibility and he's going to hold us responsible for how we use the things he gives us.

A wonderful illustration of this is in Genesis 3 where God said to Adam, "Why have you done this?" and Adam says, "The woman that you put here, she misled me." But God doesn't get into an argument about that at all. God says to the woman, "Why did you do this?" And she says, "The serpent has misled me."

And he then turns to the serpent and he says Adam's excuse has been accepted; Eve's excuse has been accepted. He went right to the serpent when she says it's the serpent's fault, and Adams says it's Eve's fault. But God punishes each one who has a position and situations where they have great opportunity, and they fail to do the right thing, and they act in ways that are contrary to him; he is going to punish them. We cannot evade our responsibility by saying what the shepherd did. God is going to judge among the sheep and everyone has his individual responsibility.

[Student question:] "In chapter 34, verse 13, it says, "gathered from the countries." I was wondering if, in the time of Ezekiel, they were scattered in more than one country?"

[MacRae's response:] There were many Israelites in Egypt. There were many in Egypt, and there were many in Babylonia. Well of course, from the Assyrian deportation in 722 B.C., they were scattered all over the world, and then again in 586 B. C. when they were deported to Babylon while some fled to Egypt.

[Another Student question:] "The point you just made about the individual's responsibility being important in this period. Somewhere I read that during this period of time, God dealt with Israel more as a nation rather than on an individual basis. But I'm not really sure that's accurate. Is that how it is?"

[MacRae's response:] I would say that God deals with the nation as a nation, and he deals with the individual as an individual, and neither of them escaped their responsibilities by blaming it on others. In this particular passage he's talking about dealing with the individual sheep, versus other passages, where he's talking about the whole nation.

[Another student question:] "Yes, but some say it's almost like, this is the first time that individual responsibility is emphasized."

[MacRae's response:] Well, I would say that individual responsibility is emphasized throughout the Bible. Maybe it's more here. But we have to recognize that everyone of us is tremendously affected by all sorts of influences

that come upon us from different directions; where we were born, how we were brought up, who our friends are. We are so influenced that there are many professors in some of our great universities who would say that there's no such thing as individual will or personal responsibility; we just were programmed. We act according to our backgrounds and to our own situations. Everything is just one big machine which we are a part of.

Then there's the opposite attitude, which they say that anybody is free to be anything they want. We can do anything we want, because we're not bound by anything but our own personal decisions. So one side says that everything in life is programmed; it's just the force of influences and you have no free will. The other side makes the argument that you are responsible for what happens. And, of course, the fact is that both of them are true, but we don't know how to put the two together. God knows, but no man knows. There are those who greatly emphasize this side and those that emphasize that side, and then they oppose each other and divide into groups over the matter.

Individual responsibility is clearly taught in Scripture but Scripture also recognizes that there are external influences upon us. But both those facts are true, and we have to recognize they both exist. So the attitudes of the shepherds are splendidly important in deciding what they are to do with the sheep, but the sheep have an individual responsibility and can make choices that will tremendously affect this world. And so the Lord says he will judge each sheep and each shepherd.

Now back to Ezekiel. "I will save my flock and they will no longer be plundered" (Ezek 34:22). When will he do that? When will people stop plundering his flock? When did that happen? Cyrus gave the flock permission to go back to the land of Israel, but it was still under the control of foreign nations. Not only that, but there were individuals among them who proved unworthy of what God was going to give them. There were the sheep, there were shepherds; fine shepherds, and bad shepherds. When is it that God is going to save his flock

so they will no longer be plundered? For he says, "The time will come when they will no longer be plundered, and I will judge between one sheep and another" (Ezek 34:22). Is Ezekiel consistently dealing with the affairs of that time, or is he looking forward to the last days, to the future judgment among his people? It hangs on this little phrase: "I will place over them one shepherd, my son David, and he will tend them and be their shepherd" (Ezek. 34:23). When did that occur? We haven't seen much that deals with that in the time of Ezekiel. Here we have a prediction which has not yet occurred: "When all of God's people will be led by one shepherd, my servant David. He will tend them and be their shepherd; I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I, the Lord, have spoken" (Ezek. 34:24). Surely here he is giving a promise which looks forward beyond anything that has yet happened. It must look forward to the universal establishment of the kingdom of God. It must look forward to a time which has not yet occurred when he establishes his servant David, and he will tend his flock.

Then Ezekiel goes on, "I will make a covenant of peace and rid the land of wild beasts so they can live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety" (vs. 25). Is he talking there of animals? About the poisonous snake and about lions and tigers; about animals who are going to be a worry to us? I know today there is much damage done around Israel from animals. They say a small group of people are killed in Israel by snakes every year; a much larger number are killed by bee stings. Certainly the bee would not be considered by anybody to be a wild beast. He's going to rid the land of wild beasts so they can live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety.

A few years ago there were four people in Yellowstone National Park who went out to camp, and they spread their sleeping bags and they lay down and they slept there, and in the night a grizzly bear came and killed all four of them. Now that is not common, that is rare. I have slept out hundreds of times. in mountains and in desert areas. He is here giving a promise which is speaking specifically of

animals and looks at the time like what Isaiah 11 described where the animals live in harmony with each other and with humankind; a time when the different animals will no longer endanger one another. He is surely looking forward to a such a period, but we need protection from humans, too.

I've walked on the Appalachian Trail in Georgia. It was 1960 and there were altogether 100 people who made the whole walk, and then the next year another 100 people made the whole walk in one year. And a few years ago I went up here north of Allentown, up on the Appalachian trail, in late July or early August. I just saw fifteen different groups with one, two, or three people in each group. And then, three years ago, there were three or four parties in a row who were attacked and beaten and had all their money stolen off them on the Appalachian Trail. The wickedness of humanity was worse than that of the animals. I had decided that I couldn't bother to be in an isolated area because of the possibility of being assaulted and injured by people. So we look forward to the wonderful time when Jesus' promise is going to come upon this earth. He's not saying, "In Heaven there will be no hurt; in Heaven there will be no pain." Rather, his kingdom will be on earth where he will protect and keep his sheep from all pain and harm.

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