

If we want to understand what Ezekiel is talking about in our Old Testament lesson, we have to understand first of all that he's actually talking about two different kinds of shepherds. The first one we hear about in our reading, where the Lord is our shepherd. The Lord is the one who takes care of us. But the second kind of shepherd comes before our reading, in the verses which come earlier, talking about human shepherds, our human leaders who have been called by God to take care of us. And it is this contrast, the difference between these two, that Ezekiel is talking about today.

Because all of our leaders, both political and religious, in the Bible are called shepherds. Now, we understand that when it comes to religious leaders, because we call our religious leaders the same thing. After all, "pastor" is a Latin word which just means "shepherd," so we call our leaders in the church "shepherds." We get that. That's easy to understand. But God also calls political leaders "shepherds" as well. Those who were called to take care of God's people, the kings of Israel, the judges of Israel, and so on. They too were the shepherds of Israel. Because the kings in the Old Testament, for example, were called by God to take care of the people. God himself put them there and gave them the charge to tend to also the spiritual lives of his people. So they were also God's shepherds. And we see this happening even in the New Testament, because in a passage like Romans chapter 13, God says that government exists because he put it there. Whoever is in government is a servant of God, one who has been called to bear the sword to punish evildoers and to carry out the justice of God on earth. So, biblically speaking, then, political and religious leaders are both called shepherds. And it is this contrast between human shepherds and God as the Good Shepherd that Ezekiel is focusing on today.

Because these human shepherds, unfortunately, failed in their God-given duties. They were not doing what they were supposed to be doing. We hear this already at the beginning of this chapter, verses one and two: "The Word of the Lord came to me, '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?'''" These human shepherds, these human leaders, political and religious, were not carrying out their duties. Instead, they were sinning against God's people and doing it in such a way that really only benefited themselves. The corruption that was going on in Israel had led to this public sin. Take the kings, for example. The kings were actually leading God's people into sin. You have the first king of the northern kingdom, Jeroboam, who actually set up golden idols, two of them, in the northern kingdom. And he told the Israelites: "You shall worship these idols." In that way, the king of Israel who was supposed to care for God's people had actually led them astray. Or how many of the other kings fell into sin and brought all kinds of wicked practices into Israel? Worshiping false gods, sacrificing their sons and their daughters to Moloch, and all kinds of things that God condemns into the people of Israel. They were responsible for these things, because they had led Israel astray. Or even the last kings of the southern kingdom, the sons of Josiah, who made themselves rich and built beautiful houses and set up all kinds of wonderful things, but at the expense of the people. They were not doing what God wanted them to do. They were only building themselves up. And in this way, Christians, the kings of Israel failed in their God-given duties.

But even the prophets, even the religious leaders, were doing the same thing. Because they sinned by speaking lies in God's name, by saying things that he had never said, by promising

things that he had never promised, by giving comfort to those who should have been afflicted, and afflicting those who should have been comforted. In all of these things, the prophets of God, who should have been taking care of the souls of the people, also sinned and led them astray. So that, from beginning to end, the human leaders, the human shepherds of Israel had failed. Where was Israel going to go? Where could they find help when all earthly help had disappeared?

Ezekiel continues on, verse three: "You eat the fat. You clothe yourselves with the wool. You slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. 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." All of these things that these leaders should have been doing was exactly what they weren't doing. They should've brought back the strayed, but they didn't. They should've cared for the needs of those who were hurt, but they didn't. They should have sought those who had been lost, but they didn't. They were really only interested in serving themselves, building up their own power, building up their own authority, because that was what they wanted. Not to follow God, but to do whatever they pleased. All of this for selfish gain.

But this was not some sort of what you sometimes hear of as a "systemic problem," as if society was at fault. Sometimes you hear that where they say, the systems which we have in place are the reasons why people do bad things. No, that's not it at all. They had a personal responsibility to care for God's people. God had called them specifically and individually to do these things. And yet they failed, sinning against God's people. Where was Israel supposed to turn in the midst of all of this?

But what was the result of it? What came of the leaders' sin? Verses five and six: "So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd. And they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered. They wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over the face of all the earth, with none to search for or seek for them." The sins of the shepherds of Israel, the sins of God's people's leaders, caused them to be scattered without help, without hope, without any kind of direction, so that they were left wondering: "Where can we find help? Where can we turn to in the midst of all of this?" Because all earthly help had disappeared. Where could they go to find the help that they should have got from the shepherds of Israel?

Christians, how often do we find ourselves in the same way? When we look for earthly help, when we look for earthly support, and yet it isn't there? When our shepherds, when our leaders sin against us, where can we turn to find help in the midst of all of that? Think of it politically, for example. Our government is called to care for us. Our political leaders are called to take care of those who are under them, to provide for and to serve their constituents. But how often do we see government officials and politicians sinning? The corruption which is at every level of government, especially at the national level, is something we all know, is something we're well aware of. Politicians who are simply enriching themselves. They have their omnibus bills, and they have all of this corruption going on, so that even though they seem to have this salary, yet they become multimillionaires by the time it's done. Enriching themselves at the expense of the people! Or even bringing about evil practices or legislating evil things, saying things that God never said or setting up laws that go contrary to what God himself says in his Word. Where are

we supposed to turn in the midst of that? Where can we find help when those who are called to be our helpers are the very ones who were sinning against us?

And it's worth pointing out here too, that those of you here today who hold some public office, that you should pay attention to what God has to say here. He is calling you to be faithful to your duties, to care for those who are set under you. And if you don't, then God himself will answer. God himself has something to say about it.

But this also applies to our religious leaders too. Those who are called to preach and to teach the Word, they are called to speak the truth in God's name. I know, speaking from my own experience, when I became a pastor, I took an oath to speak what God says, to teach the Word of God in its truth and its purity. And I will be judged for how faithful I am to that promise! But how many people are there today who claim to speak for God and yet say things that he has not said? Either to go against what he says or to change it or to pervert it, or even to promise things that God has not promised, to twist God's word into a lie? That's a dangerous thing, Christians, to say what God has not said. Because to speak lies in God's name will lead people into hell. It's a serious thing, a serious charge for those who are called to preach the Word! What then are we supposed to do? Where can we turn when those who are called to take care of our souls have sinned against us? Where can we go to find help when we have no help in this life?

That also brings a warning to me, personally, that if I do not preach the truth, if I do not preach the Word, woe to me! Because I will have to answer for it on the last day.

But this really is the basic problem here, Christians. Where do we find help when our earthly help fails? Where can we go when all of our earthly helpers are the ones who are sinning against us? Because they sin against us so often. They fail so much in their duty. And when that sin affects us, it can leave us feeling helpless, scattered like sheep throughout the mountains.

But this is why God says what he says in our reading for today. Verse 11: "For thus says the Lord God, 'Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. 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.'" When our earthly shepherds fail us, Christians, God will not. When earthly shepherds cause us to be scattered and lost and wondering, God himself will gather us up again. God will take care of us, and he will rescue us, so that we who have been broken by the things of this world have hope in the face of all of it, because God is our shepherd, the one who can and the one who will take care of us.

Verse 15: "'I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down,' declares the Lord God." When our political shepherds fail us, Jesus is the king who will not fail us, who will take care of us in all of our needs of the body. And when our spiritual shepherds fail us, Jesus, who is our Shepherd-Teacher will not fail us. He will give us all the things that we need for our soul. God himself is the Good Shepherd, the leader that we need, the leader who will never sin, the leader who will never fail us. He will take care of us in everything.

And verse 16: "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." For those who have been lost because of human sin, God will seek them out. For those who have strayed because of human sin, God will bring them back. For those who have been injured because of human sin, God will heal them again. For those who have been weakened by human sin, God will strengthen them. But above all, Christians,--and this is our hope--the fat and the strong, God will destroy. Those who have made themselves fat through human sin, those who have made themselves strong through human sin, God himself will judge on the last day. There is no corruption that will not be taken care of. There is no sin that will not be condemned. God will give us the justice which we could not find in this life. Because they won't get away with it. There is no one who is beyond the judgment of God. God himself will take care of us and give us that justice which we could not find. Because Jesus is our Good Shepherd, the one who will judge the world, and we will judge with him. All justice is ours through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So Christians, when human help fails us, turn to the Lord. When human shepherds sin against us, our Good Shepherd, our heavenly Shepherd, will never fail us. All of these sins which we suffer at the hands of others, God himself will answer, because God himself is your Shepherd, your help in every trouble. So trust him, because he will never fail you.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you are our Good Shepherd, the one who gives us every need of both body and soul. Strengthen us in these days, so that when we are sinned against, we may always look towards you, knowing that you will give us justice through your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.