

ABUSIVE SHEPHERDS AND FAT SHEEP

SERIES: KNOWING THE GOD OF
JUSTICE AND HOPE



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Paul Taylor
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Ezekiel 34: 1–31

In the first week of October, the New York Times ran an article that has reverberated into a massive cultural movement. The article revealed allegations that Harvey Weinstein, a legendary movie producer, had sexually harassed or assaulted dozens of women over the past several decades.¹ That spawned a phenomenon that people are calling the Harvey Weinstein effect: powerful men are being exposed as perpetrators of sexual harassment and losing their jobs, careers, and the respect of their fans.

The list grows every day. Actor Kevin Spacey. Political analyst Mark Halperin. Celebrity Chef John Besh. Film writer James Toback. News Anchor Bill O'Reilly. National Public Radio (NPR) editor Michael Oreskes. Conservative politician Roy Moore. British Defense Secretary Michael Fallon. The list continues.

These men were in positions that gave them an authority that was intended to be used for the benefit of others. But they used it to benefit themselves. They coerced people into unwanted sexual situations. They damaged the very people they were supposed to help.

Of course, this scenario is not new. It has been going on for years. For centuries. For millennia.

But one of the most disturbing parts of this current situation is that for several of these cases, it seems as if others knew of the situations, but nothing was done. For some, everyone knew that the individuals regularly acted inappropriately, but it was just part of the system. For others, accusations were made within various systems, but those accusations were never investigated.

Not only was power abused, but people knew. And nothing was done about it. Finally, these allegations are coming to light. Thank God that they are. But why did it take so long? Why is it so easy for power to be abused? Why is it so hard for those powerful people to then be held accountable? What can be done about it? What does the Gospel of Jesus Christ have to do with it?

Today, as we continue our series in the book of Ezekiel, we're going to see some answer to that question. We've called this series "Knowing the God of Justice and Hope" because so much of what God does in this book is for the purpose to be known: by his people and by the world.

As we look at Ezekiel 34 this morning, we are going to see God dealing with the issue of leaders who abuse their power. Last week Scott Grant preached from Ezekiel 33, which was a bit of a turning point in this book. After three chapters of introduction, we saw 29 chapters of judgment: first against God's own people, then against the nations.

Last week we saw the beginnings of the promise of restoration for God's people. Our passage this week is a combination oracle of judgment and restoration. God will judge evil and restore the victims. God's judgment will fall on powerful individuals who abuse their power. God will judge abusive shepherds and fat sheep.

Initially, this passage will be a comfort and encouragement to anyone who has been hurt by someone in power. It's important for victims to know that their suffering has not gone unnoticed. We'll see God's comfort and healing.

But then things will change a bit. We'll go from looking at shepherds to looking at the sheep. The light will shine a bit deeper. Our own hearts will be examined.

This is an important passage for a culture that constantly sees power being abused. We want it to stop. We want someone who can step in. We want someone who will repair the damage that has been done. We want a judge. Our world longs for a righteous judge.

As we look at this passage, we'll find that judge. But he will be more than a judge. He won't just judge the evil. He'll do something to solve the problem that causes it all.

Abusive shepherds

Beginning with David, the original shepherd-king of Israel, it was common to refer to the kings of Israel as her shepherds. This language is used throughout the history books, the Psalms, and the other prophets. So when Ezekiel 34 opens with a stinging indictment against the shepherds of Israel, we realize that he's talking about the kings of the nation.

Read what God says about Israel's kings.

Ezekiel 34:1-6:

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? 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. 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 all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

Remember that Ezekiel is addressing a group of Jews who are living in exile in Babylon after being displaced from their homes by the Babylonians. They find themselves “scattered over all the face of the earth” and there is “none to search for them.” These words are an accusation against the kings who are responsible for getting them there.

God had sent his people into exile as punishment for centuries of idolatry and injustice. The kings were the ones who caused that failure. Israel had been a monarchy for almost 500 years at this point. In that time, they had three great kings. Eight or nine of them had moments of decency. Thirty kings were terrible.

The story of Israel leading up to the exile is a story of leadership failure. Selfish, abusive, negligent kings.

Ezekiel is given an oracle of judgment against those kings. But most of them were dead and gone. These words aren't given for the kings, but for the people living in exile. These words of judgment are for the victims of those terrible leaders.

Think about the exiles in Babylon. They had stories from their ancestors, grandparents, and parents. They had their own personal experience. Injustice and suffering under the likes of Ahaz, Manasseh, Amon, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah. They had seen the effects of abusive, negligent, evil monarchs.

For them, these words are words of justice. Even though this is a judgment oracle, it brings comfort because it is addressed to the victims of the ones being judged. God is saying to these exiles, “Don't worry. Those people that did this to you... Those people who did a terrible job leading you for the past 500 years... Those people who are responsible for the exile... They won't get away with it. I saw them. I know they abused their power. I will judge them.”

We need to know that when we suffer from abusive leaders, God sees. How have you been hurt by bad leaders? Have you been a victim of abuse? Or just a bad boss? How have leaders failed you?

The problem when our leaders fail us is that we have no one to turn to. Think about all those victims of sexual harassment. Even when they told people, no one did anything because the people who harassed them were just too powerful.

We want to know that there is someone else—someone over or above—that will step in when our leaders fail us. We want to know that there is justice.

Notice that God is particularly concerned about the vulnerable sheep in the flock. Five categories of sheep are listed who were especially hurt: the “weak,” the “sick,” the “injured,” the “strayed,” and the “lost.”

Vulnerable people are at the most risk for power being abused. They are the ones who can't speak for themselves. They are already in a weakened state, which makes them easy targets for the powerful. They are the ones who most need to hear that powerful leaders who abuse their authority will be called to account.

So God gives Ezekiel this vision to let the victims know that their abusers will be judged. But God goes a step further. He doesn't simply judge the bad leaders. He steps in as a good leader.

Ezekiel 34:10–11:

Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

At the end of this section, God repeats his particular concern for the vulnerable sheep of the flock.

Ezekiel 34:15–16:

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. 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.

God will judge the bad shepherds. And God himself will step in to be a better shepherd. “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep.” Their kings have failed, so God will be their king.

Every single one of us in this room has a father. Some man is at least partly responsible for our being alive today. We may have a great father. We may have an average father. We may have an abusive father. We may not even know our father.

But all of us have father issues on some level. Something we wish we had from our fathers. Some way we felt they failed us. Some time that they didn't respond well to us. We've all had fathers that failed in some way.

But I often tell people that whether we had good fathers or not, everything we've experienced can point us to God as our heavenly father. Anything good that our earthly fathers did is a representation of God as our perfect father. Any failure or even abuse from our fathers shows that an earthly father is not enough. God fills the hole that our earthly fathers leave. God is the father we wish we had. God is the father we are all supposed to have.

God will be that good leader. That's what is going on here. God will step in.

One of the problems today is that people don't believe that. The kinds of questions that people ask about God are different today than they used to be. People used to question whether God existed. Now the primary question is not about his existence, but about his character.

It doesn't matter whether God exists or not. A lot of people today don't believe that God is good. They don't want God to be their leader because they think God himself is terrible. Sometimes God's actions don't seem to fit with what we expect of a loving father. Sometimes we question the character of God.

That's part of our hope for this series in Ezekiel. How do we really understand the full character of God? How do we make sense of a God who would come in a fury to judge his own people?

Our God is a god of justice and hope. Yes, God is an angry god because there are many things worth getting angry about. Yes, God punishes evil because there is much evil that needs to be punished. Yes, God can be violent because the notion that evil is overcome without anger and punishment and even violence is naïve and unrealistic.

We want a judge because we know that there are people out there who need to be judged. We want someone who stands above it all who can hold our leaders accountable. People want a judge.

The problem is that we don't want that judge to rule against us. We want someone to judge others. But we don't want to be judged ourselves.

Abusive Sheep

God has said he will judge the evil kings of the past. But a real judge points out evil wherever he finds it. So now God's judgment takes a different turn.

Ezekiel 34:17–20:

“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what

you have muddied with your feet? “Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.”

Now, God is judging between the sheep. There are several different distinctions made: between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats, between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. While the reference to shepherds would probably have been understood as referring to the kings of Israel, this would have been a more generalized reference to people with position and authority and privilege within the flock.

First, the exiles are comforted that the kings who got them into this mess will be held accountable. But now the exiles themselves are called out. Those same tendencies of selfishness and ignoring the needs of others and dominating people are called out within the sheep.

My family has chickens in our backyard. Nine of them. And I've seen firsthand the concept of a pecking order. Three of our hens constantly get pecked by the others. It's such a problem that we've had to move those three to their own coop. They were literally hen-pecked all the time.

From my perspective, they are all chickens. Why would they peck each other? Shouldn't they all just get along? Why does there even have to be a pecking order?

But can't the same thing be asked of us? We're all just sheep, right? Why can't we get along? Why do I have to make myself better than you? Why does it matter what car we drive or neighborhood we live in or company we work at or education level we've completed? We're all just sheep.

As they listen to these words, the exiles in Babylon are forced to ask a question of themselves. They have to consider their place in the pecking order and what they did to get there. They have to ask a difficult question: “Am I the fat sheep?”

For us, this can be a call to self-examination as well. It's easy to look at how others have failed us in their leadership. But when we turn inward, what do we find about ourselves? Are other people ignoring my needs? Or am I the one ignoring the needs of others? Are others using me for their agendas? Or do I use people for my agenda? Where do I fit? Am I a fat sheep or lean sheep? Where do you fit? Are you a fat sheep?

This is a different kind of problem. When our problems have to do with other people, they are much easier to solve. Find a new boss, end a friendship, move to a new church, stop talking to your family members, end your marriage. But if you're the problem, then no matter what changes you make, the problem goes with you. That's harder to solve.

When I was in college, I participated in a summer missions trip where we were assigned to a discipleship group with a staff leader. For the first part of the summer, I was filled with frustration over the way he led the group. I wanted something different than what he was offering. Then halfway through the summer he left and put me in charge of the group.

And I was able to immediately fix all the problems in the group, and every single other member constantly commented on how strong my leadership was and how all their needs were perfectly met. Or not.

Instead, I realized how hard it is to lead and how the changes I wanted to make weren't that simple. But even worse, I saw that the tendencies that frustrated me about the former leader were true of the new leader as well. I did some of the exact same things. I wasn't abusive or even a bad leader.

But I quickly realized that the problem with leadership is not limited to other people. We're all flawed.

What kind of a leader are you? We're all leaders somewhere. Do you feed the sheep? Or do you eat them? This is what's challenging about the book of Ezekiel. The spotlight always eventually gets shined on us.

So what do we do when we're exposed? It's a hard thing to change. If the problem is external, we can change our circumstances. But with an internal problem, what can we do?

For so many of the things I do, I'm not even sure I know when I'm doing it. It seems like the issues run just too deep in my heart. My own insecurity. My fears of failure and the false hope of pride. I want to feel better than someone. But how do we address this problem? Okay, I can be a fat sheep. What do I do?

The oracle in Ezekiel continues with a hint of an answer in verses 23–25.

Ezekiel 34:23–25:

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. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken. “I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods.

First God said that he would be their shepherd in response to their failed kings. But now God says that he will send them a shepherd. And there's a particular word that's powerful here: "I will set up over them one shepherd."

Remember that God's people had been divided for the past four hundred years. But now God will send a shepherd that will bring people together. God will establish a covenant of peace, and the people of God will be brought together despite their divisions.

This is a start to the problems that drive us from the inside. We find out more about this covenant as Ezekiel progresses. For now, it seems this new shepherd will offer some internal healing for the community. There will be unity. There will be peace. There will be prosperity. Those things in our hearts that drive us apart make us form pecking orders and become fat sheep. This new shepherd will take care of them.

The good shepherd

This oracle began with a condemnation of the shepherds of Israel. God responded by saying that he would step in as a shepherd. Then God began to condemn the fat sheep of Israel. God responded by saying that he would send a shepherd to unite and heal his community.

All of this is so that the people of God may be set right. Read the conclusion of the passage.

Ezekiel 34:30–31:

And they shall know that I am the LORD their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord GOD. And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord GOD.”

This is where God's plan in history is headed. Here again is our phrase: "they shall know that I am the Lord their God." With evil kings and fat sheep in their midst, the identity of God is called into question. Who is God when injustice prevails?

But when justice is done, people will know God. God's justice will demonstrate his character.

He will step in as the shepherd and send a new shepherd king; things will be set right. We find this powerful phrase in Exodus, the Psalms, Jeremiah and Revelation. God promises, "I will be your God and you will be my people." We find it here as well. This is the kind of relationship we were meant to experience.

At the turning point of history, God did send a shepherd. This new kind of a leader came to lead God's people and to transform them from within. He is the perfect shepherd.

Jesus said that he came "to seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus said that he will "lay down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Jesus said that he "knows his sheep and his sheep know him" (John 10:14). And Jesus said that he has other sheep that he will pursue to bring them into the fold (John 10:16).

Jesus will do all the things that we hear the good shepherd doing. He will seek and bring back and bind up and strengthen and heal. Jesus is the good shepherd.

But look around. Jesus may be the good shepherd, but things aren't much better. Jesus may have started a process. And we believe that he will return. He will come back as a perfect king. All the injustice we see around us will get judged. This is our hope.

But what about now? What do we do while we wait?

Remember how I said that one of the problems with leaders abusing their power is that when the boss does something wrong, who are you going to turn to? When powerful people abuse their power, there is no one to turn to.

But this oracle reminds us that there is always someone to turn to. No matter how much power any one person on earth has, there is a God in heaven who will hold that leader accountable. We always have someone to appeal to.

As God's church, then, that puts us in a unique kind of position to hold leaders accountable. We have the perspective of the God of the universe. If your boss is mistreating you, there is someone to go to. If your spouse is ignoring you, there is someone who sees. If your leaders are profiting unfairly from your efforts, you know someone that rules with justice.

This is helpful for us. It's helpful when we find ourselves victims of injustice. But it also puts us in a position to defend those people around us who may not be able to defend themselves. As the people of the God of the universe, we have a unique capability and calling to hold the leaders around us accountable.

Why did all those men get away with sexual harassment for so long without anyone saying anything? Because people were afraid. Who's going to challenge some of the most powerful people in entertainment, journalism, and politics?

But we aren't afraid of them. We don't have anything to lose. We are citizens of a different kingdom. Or at least we're supposed to be.

Relevant Magazine published an article a few days ago pointing out that this is not a scandal in Hollywood or among a certain political party. This is everywhere.² As Christians, we have a responsibility to hold all leaders accountable. We can't be harder on those people on the other side of our views. And we can't go easy on those people who are part of our camp. God's justice rises above all human distinctions.

The church in America has been known for defending our moral views. We have wanted to make the God of the Bible known by speaking against sins like sexual immorality and vice and greed and pride. But sometimes we've overlooked this way of making the God of the Bible known. We can find the "weak" and the "sick" and the "injured" and the "strayed" and the "lost," and we can defend them from the powerful people who keep them vulnerable.

Look around our community. Who are the victims of injustice? Who are the sheep being abused by their shepherds? Who are the fat sheep abusing the lean sheep? Is it unfair housing policies? Is it the sexual harassment culture of Silicon Valley tech companies? Is it the rampant greed of the materialistic pecking order? Is it access to education or protecting the unborn or hospitality to foreigners or care for the elderly or the plight of the working poor?

Where do you see bad shepherds and abusive sheep in our world? How can you step in with the authority of the God of the universe and hold leaders accountable? How can you make the God of justice and hope known in the world?

Conclusion

Our world is full of powerful people who abuse their power. It isn't limited to men who sexually harass others. This dynamic happens everywhere from elementary school playgrounds to corporate culture to national diplomats to church pastors.

We've all experienced bad leadership. We've all been hurt. We long for a different kind of leader to step in and provide the shepherding that we know would help us to thrive.

But we've all also been guilty of this. We've abused our power. Dominated or manipulated our spouse. Spoken harshly to our children. Controlled our teammates. Ignored the needs of others. We need someone to help us, to change us, to heal us.

And so we gather here on a Sunday morning to remember and remind each other that we have both those things. We have a God who leads. And we have a Savior who saves. We have a good shepherd.

We know a God of justice and hope. How can we make him known to the world? By being voices of justice and hope in the world. By holding leaders accountable—whether they are corporate or national or community or family. By looking for the vulnerable and protecting and healing them. By speaking against abuse of power as much as we speak against substance abuse.

God is our good shepherd. Thank God for that. May we know him as the perfect leader that he is. And may we make him known to a world who doesn't know the full picture of our God. We want for all the world to know the God of justice and hope.

Endnotes

¹ Kantor, Jodi and Twohey, Megan. "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades." 5 Oct. 2017, *nytimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2017.

² Huckabee, Tyler. "The Sex Abuse Revelations Aren't About Politics. They're About Justice." 13 Nov. 2017, *relevantmagazine.com*, <https://relevantmagazine.com/article/the-sex-abuse-revelations-arent-about-politics-theyre-about-justice/>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2017.