A Short Introduction to the Book of Ezekiel

With Special Attention to Ezekiel 34 – The Shepherds and the Sheep

1. Background and Setting

The Book of Ezekiel is one of the major prophetic books of the Old Testament. Ezekiel was a priest and prophet who lived during one of the most difficult periods in Israel's history.

In 597 BC, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took many of its people into exile in Babylon. Ezekiel was among those taken captive. Several years later, in 586 BC, Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed.

Ezekiel was called by God to speak to the people during this time of tremendous uncertainty, grief, and spiritual crisis.

His message had several important themes:

- **Judgment:** Israel had turned away from God, and its leaders had failed to guide the people faithfully.
- **Responsibility:** The people and their leaders needed to recognize their failures and return to God.
- **Restoration:** Even after destruction and exile, God had not abandoned the people.
- **Hope:** God promised to renew the people, give them new hearts, and restore their relationship with him.

One of the most memorable promises in Ezekiel is found in chapter 36, where God promises to give the people a new heart and put a new spirit within them.

But before Ezekiel speaks about restoration, he has something important to say about the responsibilities of those entrusted with caring for God's people.

2. Ezekiel 34 – The Shepherds and the Sheep

Ezekiel 34 is one of the most meaningful chapters in the book because it uses the familiar image of a shepherd and sheep to describe the relationship between leaders and the people they are supposed to serve.

In the Old Testament, shepherds were often used as a metaphor for kings, rulers, and religious leaders. Their responsibility was to protect, guide, and care for the people.

However, Ezekiel delivers a strong condemnation of Israel's leaders.

Verses 1–10: The Failure of Israel's Shepherds

God accuses the shepherds of caring only for themselves rather than for the sheep.

Instead of feeding and protecting the people, these leaders had taken advantage of them. They enjoyed the benefits of leadership but neglected the responsibilities that came with it.

Ezekiel describes the failures of these shepherds:

- They took care of themselves instead of caring for the flock.
- They failed to strengthen the weak.
- They did not heal the sick.
- They failed to bind up the injured.
- They did not bring back those who had wandered away.
- They ruled with harshness and force.

As a result, the sheep were scattered and vulnerable.

This passage reminds us that leadership is not about position, power, or personal recognition. It is about responsibility, service, and caring for others.

Verses 11–16: God Becomes the Shepherd

Perhaps the most beautiful part of this chapter is what happens next.

Because the human shepherds have failed, God declares that he himself will become the shepherd of his people.

God promises to search for the lost, bring back those who have wandered, care for the injured, strengthen the weak, and provide good pasture.

One of the central promises appears in 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."

This is a powerful picture of God's compassion.

God does not abandon those who have been neglected. Instead, God actively seeks them out.

Verses 17–22: God Judges Between the Sheep

The chapter then takes an interesting turn.

God is not only concerned about the failures of the leaders. God also recognizes that some sheep have mistreated other sheep.

The stronger animals have pushed aside the weaker ones, taking the best pasture and water for themselves.

God promises to judge between the sheep and protect those who are vulnerable.

This reminds us that responsibility for caring for one another belongs to the entire community, not just its leaders.

Verses 23–31: The Promise of a New Shepherd

The chapter concludes with a promise that God will establish one shepherd over the people, described as God's servant David.

This is a reference to a future Davidic king who will lead God's people faithfully.

For Christians, this passage has an important connection to Jesus, who identifies himself in John 10 as the Good Shepherd.

Jesus does not simply exercise authority over the flock. He knows his sheep, cares for them, protects them, and ultimately lays down his life for them.

The chapter ends with a beautiful reminder that the people belong to God and that God desires a relationship with them.

3. Connections to Our Faith Today

Ezekiel 34 offers several lessons that remain meaningful for us today.

First, leadership is a responsibility, not a privilege.

Whether we are talking about political leaders, church leaders, pastors, or those who lead within our families, leadership should be measured by how we care for others rather than by what we gain for ourselves.

Second, God has a special concern for the vulnerable.

The weak, injured, lost, and neglected are not forgotten by God. In fact, they receive special attention in this chapter.

Third, we are all responsible for being good shepherds to one another.

We may not all hold positions of leadership, but we all have opportunities to encourage, support, protect, and care for the people around us.

Finally, God never stops seeking those who are lost.

Even when human beings fail one another, God's love and compassion remain constant. God continues to seek, restore, and bring people back into relationship.

4. Connection to the New Testament

There is a particularly meaningful connection between Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 25:31–46, the passage about the sheep and the goats.

In Ezekiel, God condemns those who neglect the hungry, weak, sick, and vulnerable members of the flock.

In Matthew, Jesus teaches that how we treat those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, strangers, or imprisoned reflects how we treat him.

Both passages remind us that faith is not simply about what we believe. It is also about how we live and how we treat others.

Jesus takes the shepherd imagery even further in John 10:11 when he declares:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

The Good Shepherd is the opposite of the selfish shepherds condemned in Ezekiel.

Closing Thought

One of the most encouraging messages in Ezekiel 34 is that God does not give up on the sheep simply because their shepherds have failed them.

God promises to go looking for the lost, care for the injured, strengthen the weak, and bring the scattered back together.

That is the kind of shepherd God promises to be, and it is the kind of care Jesus calls us to extend to others.

Perhaps the greatest question this chapter leaves us with is not simply, *Who is taking care of me?* but also, *Whose life might become better because I took the time to care?*