

Be A Good Shepherd



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ABSTRACT: *This paper shows how God handles bad shepherds. He comes against those who are not listening to His voice. That is why we need to be in line with Him: His voice comes first so that we can filter out all other voices. The shepherds in Israel's time were prophesying peace even though they were headed for destruction because of their sins and because of God's holiness. God is jealous for His flock and watches over what they are being fed.*

KEYWORDS: *Prophets, good shepherds, Jeremiah, rebellion, restoration, astray*

Introduction

God is not mocked by His own people, no matter their position, God will judge His people that have gone down the crooked path. Even in God's judgment of sin, His grace is always extended prior to judgment. God always looks for the repentance of His people. He does not delight in seeing His sheep lost. However, His holiness calls us to be holy. God will take the covenant that He made with His people seriously. This is shown in Jeremiah 23:1-4, where God judges the shepherds because they have not taken care of the flock. Therefore, God punishes those who do not steward their job as a shepherd.

Historical Context

The people of Judah find themselves in quite a predicament: they have believed their shepherds that do not care and their prophets who only speak on behalf of themselves. They are headed for exile and judgment because of how they have not followed their covenant with God. This is clearly seen in Jeremiah 23:1-4. Jeremiah is proclaiming that hope can be found through accepting judgment. However, Jeremiah is among stubborn kings and prophets who do not know God through their actions and words (Mangum, 2020).

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Literary Analysis

Jeremiah 23:1-4 is placed within Jeremiah 21-29 and labeled by Clements (1988) as addressing “the fate of the nation and its institutions” (p. 125). The people of God have been judged throughout Jeremiah’s ministry. Now, in no chronological order, the leaders are being judged. These are prophecies centered around the removal of the Davidic monarchy and the end of the political party in Judah. In verses 1-4, there is a typical chiasmic structure of a, b, c, b, a with God in the middle saying he will take care of those evil shepherds by raising new ones that will take care of His flock (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 325). This will take time, but God in His sovereignty knows when the time is right to raise them up.

There are many questions as to whether this portion of Scripture is poetry or prose (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 342). In examining the passage, it looks to be prose. There seems to be poetic elements throughout the passage which would make sense because of the particular wordplay at work (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 324).

Detailed Analysis

Verse 1

Jeremiah 23 begins with what evil shepherds have done and what God will do (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 325). The kings of Israel have repeatedly proven to be untrustworthy as leaders. They have failed multiple times and do not cease to fail. The kings are referred to as shepherds here (Huey, 1993, p. 210). The shepherds were accused of being like wild animals, destroying what they were called to protect (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 326). Usually, shepherds are to herd the flock away from wild animals. The shepherd’s task is to guard the sheep by keeping an eye out on the wolves that watch the sheep very carefully, looking for an opportune time to attack (Keller, 1970, p. 103). However, it was the exact opposite for the shepherds who were in charge during this time. They received the “warning” or “woe” as most translations put it. Other translations of the text insert “what sorrow awaits” (NLT) and “are sure to be judged” (NET). These shepherds definitely had it coming for them. They have scattered what belongs to God alone.

Adding to the scattering of God’s people were the “peace prophets” that countered Jeremiah’s prophetic messages of hard truth. Each of the “peace prophets” messages lacked references to what they were saying (Rom-Shiloni, 2018, p. 366). The prophets preached a peace that was not actually present. This was because God’s leaders were in the wrong. Their magical divinations and dreams were what they thought God was saying (Rom-Shiloni, 2018, p. 366). This only encouraged the shepherds of Israel to lead the flock astray. They had gone astray themselves. That is what led to their own destruction. The sheep became scattered and destroyed (Huey, 1993, p. 210). Like God, Jeremiah went against these “peace prophets” whose prophecies were in vain, had illegitimate prophetic traits, and were conjured by their own will (Rom-Shiloni, 2018, p. 366).

Verse 2

The persistent rebellion against God and his human agent Nebuchadnezzar had left God’s people to invasion, capture, siege, and exile (Wright, 2014, p. 243). The Lord is continuing to pronounce judgment on the shepherds. The Lord comes down on them by revealing what He will do. They have not taken care of the flock so they will be taken care of by God (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 326). The words “driven away” (ndh in Hebrew) in verse 3 can mean a variety of things. It can mean to banish, outcast, thrust, scatter, or even seduce (Logos, Lexicon, 2023). The Greek equivalents could be translated as

“exile” or “apostasy” (Logos, 2023). That is undoubtedly very relatable to what God is doing to the shepherds who have scattered His flock. They have a serious accusation against them that deserves retribution. The contrast is clear in verses 2 and 3 between these shepherds that do not care for the flock and God who does care for His flock (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 326). There is typically a contrast between God’s ways and our ways. God is always better in His ways. God still will have mercy though. As Brueggemann points out, the verb “gather” in verse 3 is a precise resolution for the verb “scatter” in verse 2 (Brueggemann, 1998, p. 206).

Verse 3

Finally, some restoration is presented, as is often proclaimed in Jeremiah. “Verse 3 begins a salvific oracle” (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 326). The message of judgment that was rampant in Jeremiah 21-22 is paired with a message of hope and restoration for the future (Thompson, 1980, p. 486). Craigie would agree that it is an entirely positive message that comes in verse 3 after judgment in verses 1 & 2 (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 325). The God of all hope is the one who will initiate this. As Brueggemann puts it, God will act in His divine power to cause a homecoming for His people that have been exiled and scattered (Brueggemann, 1998, p. 206). He will bring the faithful remnant home. The word remnant is named 19 times throughout Jeremiah (Huey, 1993, p. 211). This faithful remnant that God gathers will be shown the blessing of creation and Abraham (Wright, 2014, p. 243).

A conflict between verses 2 and 3 still needs to be addressed. Verse 2 states that the shepherds drove the people away from God, while verse 3 mentions how the Lord drove them away (Huey, 1993, p. 211). It happened simultaneously, it was both/and as it usually is with God. Thompson states that it was both God and shepherds that contributed to being put into exile (Thompson, 1980, p. 488). However, Harrison states that it was primarily bad leadership that caused His people to go into exile (Harrison, 1973, p. 122). I would agree with Huey in saying that it was a combination of both the Lord and His people that led them into captivity. Comparatively, in Jeremiah 21:5, God says that He will fight His own people, and the Babylonians go to fight them (Huey, 1993, p. 211).

Verse 4

In verse 4, Yahweh will no longer have to visit them or take care of them in the negative sense if He has good shepherds that tend the flock as God does (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 325). Good shepherds are crucial to the wealth of the flock; God’s saying is His doing. These new shepherds will actually attend to the flock. The sheepfold will not go astray because of God and these good shepherds. The term “lacking” in verse 4 could mean that the sheep will lack no good thing with the good shepherds (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 325). The sheep can now rest in good pastures because they have good shepherds that are sent by God.

At the end of verse 4, God says that the sheep will no longer fear or panic because they have been rounded up by the shepherd (Jer. 23:4, MSG). Israel has only to rest in God because of the change that He has brought about (Craigie et al, 1991, p. 327). Since God will act, they do not have to live in fear; Judah will be close to Him who is their Good Shepherd through other good shepherds. God has been there before so He will be there again. Amidst the hope of a return to the strong political environment in which the curses of the covenant are not enacted, Judah needs to be cared for properly (Brueggemann, 1998, p. 207). Even in dire and hopeless experiences, God still offers solid hope with every promise that he brings (Brueggemann, 1980, p. 207). This promise is that all the sheep will be numbered by God and not one of them will be lost.

Biblical Theology

There is an abundance of evidence about this topic throughout the Bible. John's and Paul's letters are filled with warnings of false teachings. False teaching is not only speaking but can be exemplified through living. This is exactly what these shepherds were doing. Just as Jesus said woe to the Pharisees so God was saying woe to the kings. Matthew 23:23 states it very clearly "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you, tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." They have neglected the weightier matters! This is exactly what the kings have done in leading the people astray. Jesus also mentions that they are blind guides. They led blindly. In Ezekiel 34:2,8, there are a couple of verses that mention the shepherds not feeding the sheep but feeding themselves. They did not even search for them when they went astray. They are not like God in the garden, asking, "Where are you?" to Adam and Eve who were trying to hide because of their shame. A king is to rule over what His people were doing or make reforms. If they were not doing that, these kings were not doing that. They did not act but left God to judge them through their exile.

Application

The application is twofold: be good shepherds and look to the best shepherd- the righteous branch (Jer. 23:5). These two go hand in hand. It has been said that a healthy shepherd leads healthy sheep. In Jeremiah's case, there were unhealthy kings that were leading the people in unhealthy ways. There were also false prophets that prophesied according to their own will, not God's. This was proven throughout the surrounding context of Jeremiah 23:1-8. Examples like Jeremiah 23:13,25 "They prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray" and "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in my name saying I had a dream, I had a dream." To the king of Judah, he says, "If you do not reform your ways and care for the orphan and widow, then God will make the house a desolation" (Jer. 22:3-5).

For me, I must be a good shepherd I have to first follow the good shepherd. I must examine how I act as a shepherd to know what sheep are being fed. I cannot act like Jehoiakim or Coniah. To be a good shepherd is to see all the areas in which you are lacking as a shepherd and balance them out. In Acts 6, they had to branch out by building a new ministry team to make sure that the orphans and widows got their ration of food. To know the Lord is to do justice. That is God's character. I must check in my heart to see if there is any dishonest gain within my heart (Jer. 22:17). I must do regular checkups with the great physician who knows my all too deceitful heart (Jer. 17:9). I must check if the Lord is saying woe to me. If He is, then I have to make my heart right by repenting to Him. If God is against me, it would be terrible for me to continue that path. As Wright points out, "If our God's against us, then who can stand at all?" (Wright, 2014, p. 246). The first thing I must do as a shepherd is to get close to the Good Shepherd through the reading of His word and the silencing of my deceitful heart. That is the way that the church's leaders will not contribute to scattering the flock of God (Jer. 23:2).

Conclusion

Being a good shepherd is necessary for the flock. We can only be good shepherds when we are following the Good Shepherd. Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd. The kings of Judah needed to rely on God so that they would not lead His people astray. Even if His people are led astray by shepherds, God is still a jealous and redeeming God. He will still have His people in His hand because of His love. Even in the judgment, His lovingkindness is everlasting to His people who have been led astray.

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