

OT LESSON #43

# THE SHEPHERDS OF ISRAEL

EZEKIEL 18,34,37

by Ted L. Gibbons

**Historical Note:** Ezekiel was “A priest of the family of Zadok, and one of the captives carried away by Nebuchadnezzar along with Jehoiachin. He settled at Tel Abib on the Chebar, and prophesied [in Babylon] during a period of 22 years, 592-470 B.C.”

**INTRODUCTION:** We fought a war over agency in the pre-earth life, and are therefore permitted to live lives without undue coercion. But the Lord does have some pretty high expectations. When we enter into covenants with him, he expects us to keep them, and he examines our commitment to those covenants in many ways:

I have decreed in my heart, saith the Lord, that I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy. For if ye will not abide in my covenant ye are not worthy of me (D&C 98:14,15).

One of the things we are under covenant to do is feed his sheep. We are all shepherds in one way or another, and he has often reminded us of our duty to take care of each other. Ezekiel gives powerful lessons on our responsibilities as shepherds.

In April of 1988, Elder John R. Lasater gave a wonderful description of a true shepherd in Morocco.

Some years ago, it was my privilege to visit the country of Morocco as part of an official United States government delegation. As part of that visit, we were invited to travel some distance into the desert to visit some ruins. Five large black limousines moved across the beautiful Moroccan countryside at considerable speed. I was riding in the third limousine, which had lagged some distance behind the second. As we topped the brow of a hill, we noticed that the limousine in front of us had pulled off to the side of the road. As we drew nearer, I sensed

that an accident had occurred and suggested to my driver that we stop. The scene before us has remained with me for these many years.

An old shepherd, in the long, flowing robes of the Savior's day, was standing near the limousine in conversation with the driver. Nearby, I noted a small flock of sheep numbering not more than fifteen or twenty. An accident had occurred. The king's vehicle had struck and injured one of the sheep belonging to the old shepherd. The driver of the vehicle was explaining to him the law of the land. Because the king's vehicle had injured one of the sheep belonging to the old shepherd, he was now entitled to one hundred times its value at maturity. However, under the same law, the injured sheep must be slain and the meat divided among the people. My interpreter hastily added, "But the old shepherd will not accept the money. They never do."

Startled, I asked him why. And he added, "Because of the love he has for each of his sheep." It was then that I noticed the old shepherd reach down, lift the injured lamb in his arms, and place it in a large pouch on the front of his robe. He kept stroking its head, repeating the same word over and over again. When I asked the meaning of the word, I was informed, "Oh, he is calling it by name. All of his sheep have a name, for he is their shepherd, and the good shepherds know each one of their sheep by name."

It was as my driver predicted. The money was refused, and the old shepherd with his small flock of sheep, with the injured one tucked safely in the pouch on his robe, disappeared into the beautiful deserts of Morocco.

As we continued our journey toward the ruins, my interpreter shared with me more of the traditions and practices of the shepherds of that land. Each evening at sundown, for example, the shepherds bring their small flocks of sheep to a common enclosure where they are secured against the wolves that roam the deserts of Morocco. A single shepherd then is employed to guard the gate until morning. Then the shepherds come to the enclosure one by one, enter therein, and call forth their sheep—by name. The sheep will not hearken unto the voice of a stranger but will leave the enclosure only in the care of their true shepherd, confident and secure because the shepherd knows their names and they know his voice (John R. Lasater, "Shepherds of Israel," *Ensign*, May 1988, 74)

## 1. THE SHEPHERDS OF ISRAEL

AND the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks? Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock.

Who are these shepherds and why is the Lord pronounce a woe upon them? Don't these verses give you the impression that these shepherds are more concerned about themselves than about their sheep? The Lord could not be very pleased with that.

Ezekiel describes in great detail what shepherds are supposed to do. All of the following references are in Ezekiel.

1. (34:4) strengthen
2. (34:4) heal
3. (34:4) bind up
4. (34:4,13) bring again
5. (34:4,6,11) seek
6. (34:6,11) search
7. (34:10) deliver
8. (34:13) gather
9. (34:16) bind up
10. (34:22) save
11. (34:27,28) keep safe; allow to dwell safely
12. (34:2,3,15,23) feed

You might want to consider in the light of your own calling or stewardship just what these verbs imply. The final verb—*feed*—is probably a summary and reminds us immediately of the experience of Peter and the account in John 21:15-17.

To these instructions we might add the declaration of the Lord in John 10 that he is *the* Good Shepherd, and will lay down his life for the sheep.

In your experiences as a shepherd you will meet sheep who will not respond no matter what you do. That probably will not happen often.

We realize, as in times past, that some of the sheep will rebel and are “as a wild flock which fleeth from the shepherd.” (Mosiah 8:21.) But *most of our problems stem from lack of loving and attentive shepherding*, and more shepherds must be developed.

With a shepherd’s care, our new members, those newly born into the gospel, must be nurtured by attentive friendship as they increase in gospel knowledge and begin living new standards. Such attention will help ensure that they will not return to old habits.

With a shepherd’s loving care, our young people, our young lambs, will not be as inclined to wander. And if they do, the crook of the shepherd’s staff—a loving arm and an understanding heart—will help retrieve them.

With a shepherd’s care, many of those who are now independent of the flock can still be reclaimed (Ezra Taft Benson, “Feed My Sheep,” Ensign, Sept. 1987, 4, emphasis added).

In Ezekiel 1 and Ezekiel 33, the Lord talks about another kind of shepherd. He tells Ezekiel that he is to be a *watchman* (See Ezek. 3:17). Watchmen are usually placed on the tops of towers where they can see approaching danger from a greater distance than those below. With that calling, Ezekiel received instruction about two things shepherds must not do. First, they must not be paralyzed by fear.

And thou, son of man, be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns be with thee, and thou dost dwell among scorpions: be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house (Ezek. 2:6).

As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead: fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks, though they be a

rebellious house (Ezek. 3:9; see also D&C 60:2).

Second, the must not waste time. Read what happened when Ezekiel came to the captives at Telabib:

Then I came to them of the captivity at Telabib, that dwelt by the river of Chebar, and I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished among them seven days. And it came to pass at the end of seven days, that the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me (Ezek. 3:13-17).

It seems as though the Lord wanted Ezekiel to do something besides sit around for seven days. He had a message and he was supposed to deliver it. I think another way to say this would be “Magnify your calling.”

## **2. REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS**

The Lord does not keep a ledger of past mistakes. He speaks of his reactions to repentance with phrases like this one in Ezekiel 18:

But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. *All his transgressions* that he hath committed, they *shall not be mentioned unto him*: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live (Ezek. 18:21,22, emphasis added).

Past (forsaken) transgressions will not be mentioned. Their color will go from crimson to snow (see Isaiah 1:18); the Lord will put them out of sight (see Is. 38:17; 44:22); they will be out of reach (see Micah 7:19; Ps. 103:12); out of mind (see Jer. 31:34; also D&C 58:42); out of consideration (see Ezek 33:15,16); and out of existence (see Ps. 51:1,9; also Is. 43:25).

## **3. EZEKIEL’S VISION OF THE VALLEY OF BONES**

The Lord promised to bring life back to Israel. “So shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of men . . .” (Ezek. 36:38). Chapter 37 is a vision of the

restoration of Israel to her lands in the resurrection (see the chapter heading for Ezek. 37). Note that 37:11 tells us precisely what these bones represent.

Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD (Ezek. 37:12,14).

#### **4. THE STICK OF JUDAH AND THE STICK OF JOSEPH**

Not only does the Lord promise to give Israel renewed life. He promises to give her direction. We know from the title page that one of the major purposes of the Book of Mormon is to convince the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. That sacred volume, united with the Bible, will become a great force for righteousness in the last days.

With the passing of years, these scriptures [the sticks of Judah and Joseph] will produce successive generations of faithful Christians who know the Lord Jesus Christ and are disposed to obey His will.

The older generation has been raised without them, but there is another generation growing up. The revelations will be opened to them as to no other in the history of the world. Into their hands now are placed the sticks of Joseph and of Judah. They will develop a gospel scholarship beyond that which their forebears could achieve. They will have the testimony that Jesus is the Christ and be competent to proclaim Him and to defend Him (Boyd K. Packer, "Scriptures," Ensign, Nov. 1982, 53).

After all, one of the great purposes of the Book of Mormon is to demonstrate that the Bible is true.

These last records, which thou hast seen among the

Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first . . . (1 Nephi 13:40).

But a seer will I raise up out of the fruit of thy loins; and unto him will I give power to bring forth my word unto the seed of thy loins—and not to the bringing forth my word only, saith the Lord, but to the convincing them of my word, which shall have already gone forth among them (2 Nephi 3:11).

For behold, this is written for the intent that ye may believe that (Morm. 7:9).

And [the Lord] gave [Joseph] power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon . . . . Proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true . . . (D&C 20:8,11).

Review the promises made by the Lord about the power of these two records when they are joined together.

Wherefore, the fruit of thy loins shall write; and the fruit of the loins of Judah shall write; and that which shall be written by the fruit of thy loins, and also that which shall be written by the fruit of the loins of Judah, shall grow together, unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions, and establishing peace among the fruit of thy loins, and bringing them to the knowledge of their fathers in the latter days, and also to the knowledge of my covenants, saith the Lord (2 Nephi 3:12).

**CONCLUSION:** We will have a part in this work. We are shepherds and we are the custodians of the stick of Joseph, but we are also sheep. I love the descriptions in John 10 of what sheep are supposed to do.

1. The sheep hear his voice (John 10:3)
2. The sheep follow him (John 10:4,27)
3. The sheep know his voice (John 10:4)
4. The sheep will not listen to thieves and robbers (John 10:8)

5. The sheep go in and out by the door (John 10:9)

What has the voice of the Shepherd asked you to do with the sticks of Judah and Joseph? What has he asked you to do for the sheep and lambs he has assigned to you in your wards and branches?

Copyright © 2002 by Ted Gibbons <tedgibbons@yahoo.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.