

PASTOR'S NOTES. Biblical Perspectives on Politics... Part 3

*The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you 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 fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.*

*Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep;*

*therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand 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, so that they may not be food for them.* (Ezekiel 34:1-4, 7-10, NRSV)

As I mentioned in the last two articles, the Bible covers more than 2,000 years of politics. This time, I want to focus on the last three periods:

- 5. With the fall of the Kingdoms of Israel (721 BC) and Judah (586 BC), the people were a sort of slave nation, living in the land but under the control of Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks (from about 586-160 BC). There were Israelites who had authority by collaborating with the ruling nation, but they would have been seen as traitors to their people.
- 6. There was about a hundred-year span (from about 160-63 BC) where the Jews gained independence and exercised their own power over their people, sometimes oppressively.
- 7. But then Rome took over (63 BC), and during the entire time of the New Testament, the people again lived as second-class citizens with no political power at all.

When the Jews lost their independence in 586 BC, they began a period of self-reflection different from other peoples. Most people groups, after they were conquered, bought the line that the gods favored the powerful, and they assimilated into the culture of their conquerors. The Assyrians and Babylonians accelerated this by relocating people to other parts of the empire to further dilute their ethnic identity and religious history. But the Jews, instead of abandoning their religion, believed that their God was still the one true God, and that the reason for their defeat was that they had failed God. This conviction kept them as a tightly-knit group even while living in Babylon, and probably had a lot to do with them being allowed to return to Jerusalem.

Even though Babylonian, Persian, and Greek rulers could be harsh, or even brutal, there is almost nothing critical written about them in the Old Testament. The focus was on the Jewish people and the Jewish leadership. I suppose you could say they followed a version of the Serenity Prayer: “Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” They recognized that they had little or no power to change the overarching government (possibly except for the Book of Esther), and so they kept their attention on what they could control. This also carries over the New Testament, where the Romans are rarely criticized (except in Revelation as “Babylon”), even though they enslaved people, taxed them, and

tortured anyone who was merely accused. This lack of criticism is likely at the root of the objectively false claim, persisting over the centuries, that the Jews killed Jesus.

In the passage above, Ezekiel chastises the “shepherds of Israel,” who are now local leaders who serve under the foreign authority. These leaders don’t have ultimate authority, but they do get kickbacks from the governing powers, and can gain a degree of wealth. But the words of the prophets are fairly consistent about this: whether King or local leader, the job of the leader is to care for the people, to “shepherd the flock,” and that means not only feeding them, but also finding them if lost, and strengthening them if weak.

Zechariah echoes this criticism:

*“...Therefore the people wander like sheep; they suffer for lack of a shepherd. My anger is hot against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders; for the LORD of hosts cares for His flock, the house of Judah, and will make them like His proud war-horse.”*

(Zechariah 10:2b-3, NRSV)

During period 6 above, when Judea now had independence (around 160 BC), there was a golden opportunity to now be the nation that God had always wanted them to be, but corrupt leadership while under Greek rule seemed only to lead to further corrupt leadership without Greek rule. When Rome took over Jerusalem in 63 BC, there were some Jews who thought this would actually be an improvement.

So now, consider Jesus’ words:

*So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by Me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.*

*I am the good shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father. And I lay down My life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”*

(John 14:7-16, NRSV)

When Jesus is speaking of thieves and bandits, He is pointing back to Ezekiel and Zechariah. But He takes it a step further. Not only are shepherds called on to feed the flock, to find the lost, and to strengthen the weak, but they are called to lay down their lives for the sheep.

This is not just an isolated passage in the New Testament, it points to the very reason Jesus laid down His life. I’ll say more about this in the next article.

Yours in Christ,

