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June 15th: Ezekiel 34 & Acts 15:22-35

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Judgment upon the false shepherds. The letter of the Jerusalem Council.

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Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 34. 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. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord.

As I live, declares the Lord God, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, 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, 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. For thus says the Lord God, Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.

As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered, on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country.

I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord.

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. 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. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust all the week with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock, they shall no longer be a prey, and I will judge between sheep and sheep, 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. And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season, they shall be showers of blessing, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land, and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslave them. They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them, they shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid, and I will provide for them renowned plantations, so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations, 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. The connection between Israel and a flock, and its leaders and shepherds, is one that is found throughout the scriptures in both Old and New Testaments. The patriarchs were shepherds, and already in Genesis we see parallels being drawn between Jacob's flocks and his family.

In Exodus, Moses the shepherd leads Israel out of Egypt, and through the wilderness with a shepherd's rod. In Numbers chapter 27 verse 17, before appointing Joshua as his successor, Moses speaks of the danger of the children of Israel becoming a sheep without a shepherd. David, the first of the great royal dynasty, was called from the sheep to be the shepherd of the Lord's flock.

David himself spoke of the Lord as his own shepherd in the 23rd Psalm. In Psalm 100 verse 3, the Lord's relationship to his people is described in similar terms. Know that the Lord, he is God, it is he who made us, and we are his, we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Shepherd and flock imagery, and lots of associated images around those, repeatedly surface in the prophets. There the imagery is used of the leaders of Israel and Judah, and of the Lord himself in passages like Isaiah chapter 40 verses 10 to 11. Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him.

Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. In the New Testament, Christ speaks of himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, and the guardians of his flock are referred to as shepherds under him as the chief shepherd.

The shepherd is the one who guides the flock, provides it with good pasture and water, and protects it from the many dangers of wild beasts, robbers, and the wilderness. One of the fullest developments of shepherd and flock imagery is found in Ezekiel chapter 34, where the Lord condemns the unfaithful shepherds of Israel. It is quite likely that this

passage in Ezekiel was, as Daniel Bloch suggests, working with and elaborating the relatively recent prophecy of Jeremiah chapter 23 verses 1 to 8, which had explored the same imagery.

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people, You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord.

Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all of the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely, and this is the name by which he will be called. The Lord is our righteousness. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer say, As the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but, As the Lord lives, who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country, and out of all the countries where he had driven them, then they shall dwell in their own land.

Ezekiel's prophecy in this passage confirms the earlier message of Jeremiah and addresses it more directly to the exiles of Judah with him in Babylon. Verses 2-6 present an indictment of the shepherds of Israel. They had been feeding themselves instead of the sheep.

A good authority ministers to the needs of those under their care and doesn't merely act for their own profit, advancement or aggrandizement. Yet the shepherds of Israel weren't protecting the flock of the Lord their master. Rather they were exploiting it for themselves, in the illustration using it for their milk, meat and wool, without any care for the well-being of the sheep themselves and the flock.

Their lack of concern was especially apparent in their attitude towards the needs of the weakest and most vulnerable members of the flock. The result was the scattering and wandering of the flock in places where they were easy prey for wild beasts. The sin of the unfaithful shepherds is most aggravated by the fact that they are not merely abusing their own flocks or even some flock of the people, but the Lord's own flock, which he had brought out of Egypt and through the wilderness and planted in the good pasture of his land.

Now, however, due to the actions of these false shepherds, the flock was scattered. Much like the watchman who was responsible to sound the alarm, the shepherd was

responsible for the protection of the flock entrusted to his care. After the indictment of verses 2-6, the false shepherds are sentenced.

In verses 7-10, the Lord would hold them culpable for the ravaged and scattered flock and for their exploitative behaviour. The flock would be rescued from the mounds of their predatory shepherds. The shocking image of the shepherd as predator is an important one to consider.

The impression given by this passage is that the flock of the Lord would not have become the prey of foreign enemies had they not been preyed upon by their own wicked rulers first, in a gross perversion of the legacy of David, the shepherd king. In addition to holding the false shepherds responsible, the Lord would deliver the scattered sheep of his flock like a good shepherd. Block notes the shift of the meaning of the key verb from verse 6 to verse 10 to verse 11, from seek or look for, to demand or hold accountable, to pursue or even to seek the welfare of.

He suggests that the second verb of the Lord's statement in verse 11 denotes a close examination of the condition of the sheep. Having examined their condition, the Lord will rescue the flock from the places where they have been scattered, will bring them out, gather them to their own land and feed them through the pasture lands of Israel once more. They would enjoy the bounty of his rich land once again and more importantly, his presence as their good shepherd in their midst, watching over and protecting them, seeking those who are lost, returning the stray sheep, binding up the injured sheep and strengthening the weak.

The fat and strong sheep mentioned in verse 16 seem to be a different set of oppressors, alongside the oppressive shepherds. Presumably these are the oppressive rich of the land. They would be destroyed while the vulnerable would be rescued and established.

Rulers of the people were often associated with rams and male goats. For instance, in Ezekiel chapter 39 verse 18, you shall eat the flesh of the mighty and drink the blood of the princes of the earth, of rams, of lambs, and of the goats, of bulls, all of them fat beasts of Bashan. An association between rulers of the people and male goats is also seen in the fact that sin offerings from rulers of Israel were male goats.

While the shepherds were the kings, the rams and male goats were presumably the prominent officials and elders among the people, the leading members of the flock itself. The greed of the powerful men among the people was a cause of oppression for the other members of the flock. They were destroying the pasture land and polluting the water, denying the rest of the flock enjoyment of what should have been the common possession of all of the members of the flock.

The Lord would intervene in this dysfunctional situation and establish justice. He would rescue the flock from their predators, whether their own cruel shepherds or the external

enemies to which they had been scattered. He would also establish healthy internal relationships within the flock.

The prophet Jeremiah had promised the house of Israel that the Lord would raise up a faithful son of David to rule over them in righteousness. In Jeremiah chapter 30 verses 8 to 10, The Lord promises the same thing here. He would establish a faithful ruler, a new David, in the place of the wicked shepherds.

As in the case of the first David, this new David would be directly chosen by the Lord himself. He would be a single shepherd, a man uniting a divided and later scattered people as one people once again. At this point in history, after the fall of the kingdom and the capture of Zedekiah, with Jehoiachin already being in exile, it might look as though the Davidic dynasty was finally extinguished, but it would be re-established and the fortunes of the nation with it.

In the Davidic covenant, the Davidic king was described as the son of the Lord, and the re-establishment of the Davidic dynasty would be a sign of the Lord's own presence with and renewed relationship with Israel as his people. With the establishment of the Davidic king, the Lord would establish conditions of peace and well-being in the land. Security, rest, blessing, plenty, freedom and deliverance from predators and enemies.

Covenant of peace language is also used in Numbers 25.12 in reference to the reward given to Zealous Phinehas, and also in Isaiah 54.10, again talking about the restoration of the people. We might see similar covenant language used at the end of Jeremiah 33. Bloch notes the parallels between the lists of blessings in verses 25-30 and those of Leviticus 26-4-13, which lists the blessings of the covenant.

He also notes that the blessings go through the same pattern twice. Peace with the animals, blessing with the vegetation, deliverance from oppression. In verse 30 we find another recognition formula.

All of this would be another proof of the Lord's identity, but also of Israel's identity as his people. The prophecy ends by returning to the controlling metaphor of the flock and the shepherd, as the Lord affirms his relationship with the house of Israel once more in those terms. A question to consider.

Why do you think that the metaphor of sheep and shepherd is such a popular and pervasive one in scripture? What can we learn from it? Acts 15 verses 22-35 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them, and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Bar-Sabbath, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter. The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia.

Greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth, for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.

If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them.

But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. After the Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter 15, the Council writes a letter communicating their judgment, and emissaries are appointed to bear it to Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. The letter largely repeats the statements made by James at the conclusion of the Council's deliberations.

The apostles and elders of Jerusalem want to appoint some representatives of Jerusalem to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. We should recall that Barnabas himself had initially been a representative of the Jerusalem Church, sent to Antioch in chapter 11 verse 22. He had stayed in Antioch for at least a year after that, ministering there.

And after that time, he had accompanied Paul on a visit to Jerusalem at the end of chapter 11, bringing relief to the Christians in Jerusalem. They had returned at the end of chapter 12, and we read nothing about what occurred to Paul and Barnabas on that particular journey to Jerusalem in the book of Acts. But the book of Galatians describes a private meeting with the pillars of the Jerusalem Church, after Paul went there with Barnabas and Titus.

During the visit, according to Paul's account in Galatians, he set before the Jerusalem leaders the message that he and Barnabas bore to the Gentiles. They had given Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, recognising that Paul had been entrusted with the mission to the uncircumcised in a manner comparable to the way that Peter was the chief minister entrusted with the mission to the circumcised. If it was not already his principal base before he had returned from Jerusalem, Antioch was definitely the focus of

Barnabas' mission thereafter.

At the beginning of chapter 13, Barnabas is listed as one of the prophets and teachers of the Antioch Church, alongside Saul, whom he had brought there from Tarsus at the end of chapter 11. The Antioch Church then set apart Barnabas and Saul for the mission, according to the word of the Spirit. Now they are back in Jerusalem again, albeit under slightly more complicated circumstances.

At this point in the Church's history, Jerusalem is still very much the centre. It's the place with the greatest influence and power. Antioch is a church of growing importance and the doorway to the Gentile mission.

The relationship between these two churches is of immense significance. If these two churches were to part ways, or if Antioch was simply to adapt to the demands of the Christians of a more Pharisaic persuasion in Jerusalem, the entire formation of a united Jew and Gentile church might founder or never truly get off the ground to begin with. Strengthening the bonds between these churches could not be more important.

At this juncture, the bond is mostly one forged by a few key ministers such as Paul and Barnabas, and also by the relief provided by the Christians in Antioch to the poor Christians in Judea. The visit of the men from James, who had insisted that the Gentiles in Antioch needed to be circumcised, was near disastrous. It was a threat to the Gentile mission in its very infancy, and it was a strain upon the fragile relationship between the two churches.

Arriving at such a favourable judgement for the Gentile mission was immensely important, and naturally it would be a cause for considerable rejoicing when it was shared with the church in Antioch. The Jerusalem church sent some of their leading men, Silas and Judas called Bar-sabbas, to strengthen the connection between the churches. They also laid to rest any confusion that might have arisen from the earlier visit of the Judaizers from Jerusalem.

They were teachers that had gone out from Jerusalem, and they had unsettled the minds of the Christians in Antioch, but they had not been sent on their mission by the apostles and elders. Their message was not approved. To make sure that the message is communicated beyond any dispute, the council send these representatives of Jerusalem to confirm the judgement of the council by their own testimony, and to strengthen the bond between the churches by ministering among them for a time.

The Jerusalem church also affirms their respect and love for Barnabas and Paul, commending their missionary ventures, which they did not consider controversial at all, but were in one mind in approving. They list the only four requirements that they would place upon them, abstaining from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. The nature of these restrictions has been a

matter of debate.

Paul teaches against idol meat in 1 Corinthians chapters 8-10. There he begins with some arguments focusing on giving up freedom for the sake of others, so as not to scandalize them or harm their conscience. In 1 Corinthians chapter 8 verses 8-13, Food will not commend us to God.

We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so, by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

Thus sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. Later Paul moves to some more absolute arguments against certain forms of participation in idol meat, showing that such meat represented association with demons themselves.

1 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 14-22 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people. Judge for yourselves what I say.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel. Are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagan sacrifice they offer to demons, and not to God.

I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? In his teaching then, Paul makes allowances for the possible difficulties that Gentiles might have in obtaining food without any sort of association with idols, making clear that the meat was not unclean in itself and that outside of a context where they would knowingly and openly be participating in a meal that was associated with the worship of idols they could eat any meat without asking any questions. 1 Corinthians 10, verses 25-33 continues the argument in this way. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if

someone says to you, this has been offered in sacrifice, then do not eat it for the sake of the one who informed you and for the sake of conscience. I do not mean your conscience, but his.

For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Much of the purpose of this commandment as Paul describes it, seems to be to ensure that Jews are not given a cause of offence by Gentiles in the church.

The Gentiles should be mindful of Jewish scruples. However, this commandment is also there in order that they might keep a clear distance from the idolatry that permeated the whole of pagan society, being careful not to compromise in a matter where it would be very easy to do so. We should also observe that restrictions upon food sacrificed to idols were applied to Gentiles living among the Israelites in the book of Leviticus, in chapter 17, verse 7-9 of that book.

So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations. And you shall say to them, Anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who serve in among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the Lord, that man shall be cut off from his people.

The restrictions upon consuming blood and eating strangled animals go together, the strangling of the animal was designed as a means of keeping the blood within. This goes back to Genesis and the commandment given to Noah in chapter 9, verses 3-4. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you, and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.

But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is its blood. The same requirement to refrain from blood is given to the Gentiles living among the Jews in Leviticus chapter 17, verses 10-14. The passage that immediately follows the one that we read earlier.

If anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who serve in among them, eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who serves among you eat blood.

Any one also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who serve in among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten, shall pour out its blood and cover

it with earth. For the life of every creature is its blood, its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood.

Whoever eats it shall be cut off. This prohibition then was not exclusive to Jews, but was more general to all peoples. It arises from the connection between the life of creatures and their blood, a connection comparable to the connection between the soul and the eyes, for instance.

It is not a literal identification of one with the other, but a symbolic manifestation of the one in the other. It should also be understood in the context of a sacrificial system. As God said to his people, I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

In a context where blood sacrifices were being made, ingesting blood would have great significance. The question of whether this applies in the same way in societies where that symbolic bond does not function in the same way, where we are no longer sacrificing animals and engaging in blood rites, and where there is little chance of causing scandal to others, is a question upon which Christians differ. Many European societies, for instance, though traditionally Christian, have eaten blood puddings.

The final prohibition is upon sexual immorality. Why single out sexual immorality at this point? The other prohibitions concern foods, but this seems to be a more directly moral issue. A few things might be noted on this front.

First, sexual immorality connected with the other commandments in its more direct relationship to purity concerns. Sins such as, let's say, stealing, were morally prohibited, but didn't have the same relationship to purity as the defilement caused by sexual immorality. Second, attitudes to sexual conduct were among the most pronounced differences between Jews and Gentiles.

Many of the other requirements of the law might have been affirmed by pagan ethicists, but attitudes to sexual behavior could be different in very pronounced ways. Third, sexual immorality of various kinds was a further aspect of the commandments of Leviticus that applied to Jews and Gentiles alike. The Council, then, it would seem, is simply affirming that the Gentiles need to observe the commandments that were placed upon Gentile sojourners among Israel, rather than needing to observe the whole law of Moses.

The emissaries return with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. When the congregation is gathered together, the letter from the Jerusalem Council is read, and it meets with great joy. Having considered the situation that the Antioch church was in, the cause for their joy should be quite evident.

A very great deal was riding upon the response of the Jerusalem church. Had their message been a rebuke, the entire direction of the church would have changed, and the nature of the whole Christian movement would have been plunged into uncertainty. Indeed, it had been in such uncertainty, after the teaching of the Judaizers who came from Jerusalem, until this letter resolved it.

Judas and Silas, who had been sent up from Jerusalem, remained there for some time, ministering among them, further strengthening the bond between the two key churches of Antioch and Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Christians are then sent back to Jerusalem. Verse 34, which refers to Silas deciding to stay, is omitted by most texts.

While it might help us to explain why Silas is seemingly in Antioch, to accompany Paul on his second missionary journey a few verses later, it probably is not in the original text. And there are plenty of other explanations for why Silas could have returned, or not even left. Luke just doesn't explain why.

Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch and continue to minister there, alongside many other ministers. It seems that the work of Christ there is really growing. A question to consider, how does Paul's treatment of issues of sexual morality differ from his treatment of idol food in the book of 1 Corinthians? How might reflecting upon Paul's teaching, and the teaching of Leviticus chapters 17 and 18, help us better to understand the place of these commandments in the life of the people of God today?