

## Selfish Shepherds

**“This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?”** (Ezekiel 34:2).

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 34:1-6

**Song:** “Others”

Several years ago, some televangelists began asking their followers for money to purchase luxury planes. One said it was necessary, even though he had three, because the newest aircraft could go anywhere in one stop, saving money. Although requestors claimed their purpose was to spread the gospel, the exorbitant cost required for a few people to travel extravagantly seemed, to many, to be undermining the mission.

In Ezekiel’s time, civil and religious leaders were in charge of ministering to the people, but they were taking similar advantage. Ezekiel 34:3 says, “You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.” Those acting as shepherds were putting their own desires before the needs of those they were supposed to be looking after.

God is clear that the care of His people is a top priority and that trouble will come to those who indulge themselves rather than caring for the needs of His flock. Although most of us aren’t pastors, we all need to be on guard against the dangers of selfishness and benefiting at the expense of others.

**Father,** please open my eyes to any selfish habits I have, and open my heart to love and serve others in ways that honor You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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October 28–November 3. **Toni Campbell** writes about church outreach and serves others as the benevolence director at her church.

## For the Love of Boundaries

**[God said,] “As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness” (Ezekiel 34:12).**

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 34:7-16

**Song:** “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”

On a television show called *Homestead Rescue*, the experienced Raney family helps those who have decided to live “off the grid” but are having a hard time making it work. In one episode, the landowners were insistent on raising their pigs completely free-range. However, with no boundaries or oversight, the pigs roamed and became food for wild animals living in the mountainous area. Although their pigs were killed daily, the landowners were resistant to surrendering their way of doing things. The Raney family explained that it was more caring and humane to keep a watchful eye on the pigs than to allow them to come to harm while roaming free.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord said that His people, like sheep, lacked the guidance of a caring shepherd. Once again, God charged the leaders with putting their own desires ahead of the people’s needs and leaving them in harm’s way.

Even though our spiritual shepherds may fail us, our Good Shepherd, Jesus, will tenderly care for us (Psalm 23). And when we go astray, He is faithful to bring us back into the fold, where He binds our wounds and strengthens us.

**Father,** thank You for the loving boundaries You provide for my care and protection, and thank You for pursuing me when I go astray. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Choosing the Right Role Model

**[God, said,] “Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another” (Ezekiel 34:21-22).**

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 34:17-31

**Song:** “Only Jesus”

Back in the 1980s, one of the anti-drug public service announcements showed a father confronting his son with a box of drug paraphernalia he'd found in his son's room. As the son hemmed and hawed at being confronted, the father demanded, “Who taught you how to use this stuff?” In a poignant moment, the son fired back a startling response: “*You*, alright?! I learned it by watching *you!*”

We've learned that the shepherds in Ezekiel's day, due to their lack of attentiveness and care, were guilty of abusing the flock. They were putting their own needs first, which left those in their care in harm's way. In today's passage, the Lord is saying that some of the people have taken to imitating the worst characteristics of their spiritual shepherds, who were power-hungry and abusive to their fellow Israelites.

Sadly, this type of behavior isn't limited to God's people during Ezekiel's day. We are all susceptible to following wrong examples, and that is why the one we should ultimately seek to imitate is the Lord himself. He is the only shepherd without flaw and our perfect model for life and godliness.

**Father,** help me keep my eyes on Jesus, my Shepherd, as I seek to grow in His likeness. In Jesus' name, amen.

## One Way In

**Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. . . . I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved” (John 10:7, 9).**

**Scripture:** John 10:1-10

**Song:** “Whosoever Will”

In ancient times, sheep pens were low-lying, walled-in structures or caves with one opening for the sheep to enter or exit through. This opening was guarded by the shepherd, who used his own body as the gate. An outsider trying to get to the sheep would have to get past the shepherd to gain access to the flock. All those trying to enter another way did not have a legitimate purpose. They were thieves and robbers.

Although Jesus uses a common practice of the day as His illustration in verses 1-5, the Pharisees didn’t comprehend the analogy. So beginning in verse 7, Jesus spells it out for them by saying, “I am the gate,” not once, but twice. By this emphasis there could be no mistake that the only way to salvation and safety is through Him. He is also painting the picture for what is to come in His ministry—a time when He will truly lay down His life for His sheep.

When others suggest there is more than one way to salvation, we need to remember that any way to Heaven other than through Jesus is false and unsafe. It is actually an attempt to steal, kill, and destroy us. The only way to eternal life is through the Jesus gate.

**Father,** help me to hear and follow Your voice and Yours alone. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Never Abandoned

**[Jesus said,] “When [the hired hand] sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away” (John 10:12).**

**Scripture:** John 10:11-18

**Song:** “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”

Many of us can probably think of a time when someone we trusted abandoned us—someone we thought was a friend, a confidante, even a protector. We learned the hard lesson that not everyone is willing to do life with us when things get hard. When I walked through such a season in my own life, it would have been easy to feel abandoned. Instead, I learned that Christ never leaves or forsakes me. He is true security.

In Jesus’ comparison of the hired hand versus the shepherd, it all comes down to motivation. The hired hand tends the sheep because it benefits him monetarily. He has no vested interest other than his own. But the shepherd tends the sheep to protect and provide for their well-being. They are his main concern, and the sheep can feel safe in his presence.

Jesus reminds us that when others abandon us, He is faithful. He, the true shepherd, willingly laid down His life for us so that we might receive salvation and, by His indwelling Spirit, enjoy His presence everywhere we go. In verse 18 He says of His life, “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.”

**Father,** thank You that Jesus laid His life down for me willingly, and thank You that He rose again and conquered death that I might live with You forever. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Perseverance and Praise

One of the elders asked me [John], “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation. . . . Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence” (Revelation 7:13-15).

**Scripture:** Revelation 7:1-4, 9-17

**Song:** “For All the Saints”

There are many stories of people who have persevered for God’s kingdom. Elisabeth Elliott, David Livingstone, and Mary Slessor are just a handful of the saints who dedicated their lives to spreading the gospel. But none of these compares to the scene described in Revelation 7.

In John’s vision of the future, those in white robes who stand before the throne have come through the most awful time in history. In a short span of time, they have endured wars, famines, natural disasters, disease, and persecution unlike anything humanity has experienced to date. Having stood firm in the Lord amidst extreme persecution, these saints finally claim the ultimate reward of serving God in His heavenly temple.

While difficult trials may seem overwhelming at times, nothing must sway us from being faithful to our Lord. A time is coming when we will neither hunger nor thirst, and the Lamb, who is also our shepherd, will keep us from all harm. He is worthy of our praise despite our current circumstances.

**Father**, help me to stand strong in adversity so that I may be able to praise You throughout eternity. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Rest for the Busy

**He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul** (Psalm 23:2-3).

**Scripture:** Psalm 23

**Song:** “This Is My Father’s World”

During a particularly difficult time in my life, I found peace at a local lake. Each evening, I would drive to the park, sit on a bench near the shoreline, and soak in the amazing colors of the sunset painting the sky. Sometimes I’d think, *This is time wasted. You have things to do. What are you accomplishing by sitting still?* But then God seemed to quiet that voice with His own: “Sit with Me, and let’s enjoy this time together. There is much to be gained by being still in My presence.” As the sun sank below the horizon, taking my cares with it, I realized how true it was that I needed this time with Him. My daily meeting with Him left me feeling refreshed and able to face the next day.

The psalmist was pressed on every side by his enemies, but he knew the only place to find true rest for his soul was in the refreshing presence of God. It was like the coolness of green pastures and the calmness of quiet waters.

When we rush into our busy day, we may believe we don’t have time to spend with God. The truth is, we cannot afford *not* to spend time in His presence and find the peace we need.

**Father**, time with You is what I truly need, and it’s Your desire to care for me and refresh my soul with Your presence. In Jesus’ name, amen.