

*May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,<sup>21</sup> equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)*

### **The Great Shepherd**

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, we remember that Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. But if you were paying attention to the lessons that I read, you may have noticed none of them call Jesus the Good Shepherd. Now, the verse after our gospel lesson for today does. But our epistle lesson from the book of Hebrews says something slightly different. It calls him “that great shepherd of the sheep.” Sometimes, when we want to make a point, we say that something isn’t just good. It’s great! Do you know what the Greek word for great is? Mega. So if I can indulge in a little slang here, the book of Hebrews calls Jesus the Mega Shepherd. What makes Jesus the Great Shepherd? Well, it would have to be something above and beyond what any ordinary shepherd could do. **The Great Shepherd came back from the dead. The Great Shepherd equips the sheep.**

#### **I.**

This text is all about what God does. That may seem obvious, but it’s a vital point. You see, the natural tendency of us sinful human beings is to make everything about us. You see that in every day life. You go to talk to someone about some issue that’s bothering you. Before you even realize what’s happening, you’re talking about what they feel and what they want. You may even say, “It’s not about you!” That happens with spiritual matters, too. I was once a part of a conversation about relocating a church. Now, this church was very hard to find if you didn’t already know where it was. But one of the long time members stood up and dismissed the whole discussion by saying, “We don’t have any trouble finding the church.” Someone else later commented, “It’s not about you.” It was about visitors and prospects. But that very Christian man automatically saw the whole discussion in terms of his experience. It never occurred to him to think about someone else’s. Since we get very attached and even emotional about our churches, we easily slip into this kind of thinking on almost any issue our church faces.

We do that with things like where the church should be located or how we like the services or the hymns or what we think of the pastor or the teachers. And we do it with many other things, too. This short reading from Hebrews talks about how God raised Jesus from the dead. Could we ever make Easter all about us? Maybe you wouldn’t think so, but the truth is, people do it every day. Now, there is a sense in which Easter is about us: it’s about what Jesus did for us. His rising from the dead took away our sins. His rising from the dead promises that we will go to heaven when we die and that our bodies will rise from the dead. His rising from the dead even promises that Jesus is taking care of us and that God will do all things for the good of those who love him. Those promises are ours and we take them very personally.

But did you notice how our benefit is totally dependant on his rising? The sinful human heart wants to make it all about us – we’re good people and Jesus rose to teach us to love more perfectly. Some people try to make his resurrection a transformational miracle, but now it’s up to us to live differently. You may even hear it said that Jesus rose to make us better, stronger, more realized people. In effect they leave Jesus out. What is more likely to occur among us is just to forget to emphasize Jesus in Easter. It becomes a sentimental holiday about the Easter bunny. It becomes family time rather than church time. Or it becomes one of the two days a year when we show up to church – and we won’t be back until Christmas. I once ran across a website in which a pastor raged against the term Easter because he thought it made it too easy to forget about Jesus. He insisted that we should call that holiday the Festival of the Resurrection to remind us what really happened. I thought he was a little over the top. But I do agree that we live in a society that does an amazing job of making Easter all about bunnies and eggs and going out to dinner and manages to gloss over the resurrection.

I hope we aren’t guilty of doing that. But you know what? Every one of us was born a sinner. The sinful nature inside us doesn’t want to hear about Jesus. So if he can distract us from the true meaning of this season, great! That sinful nature believes that we are good people. We don’t sell drugs. We don’t abuse our kids. We aren’t big jerks like our boss or our neighbor or that kid that always gives us a hard time. So,

sometimes Easter doesn't move us because we don't see the need for forgiveness. We look instead for some emotional thing that will move us. We want this season to be all about us and our experience.

That tendency in our sinful heart to make Jesus' resurrection all about us shows that we are self-serving, self-worshipping rebels by nature and that we deserve only death and hell. So the writer to the Hebrews says, **“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep ...”** What is the blood of the eternal covenant? It's Jesus' blood. God made a decision before the world began that when the time was right he would send his Son into this world to die and pay for the selfishness that drives the human heart. In the Garden of Eden, God made the first promise, the first covenant. He bound himself to a promise that his Son would die to crush the serpent's head and free us from the power of sin and death and hell. God obligated himself to keep that promise so that we don't spend eternity in hell. God bound himself to a covenant that will last forever.

So Jesus came, the Son of God, but also the son of Mary, and he shed that blood on the cross. He undid our hell not just for a while, not just until the world ends, but for all eternity, for as long as God exists – forever. That's the eternal covenant. That blood of the eternal covenant raised Jesus because it made the payment we needed. Jesus' resurrection means that God is satisfied and all our sin and pride are wiped away. Since the blood of the Son of God made man paid for every sin of every person who ever lived, Jesus rose. His blood was enough.

We didn't make that happen. God did. That is why the book of Hebrews calls him the God of peace. He is the God who gives peace. The pride that leads us away from God and makes us focus on ourselves, on what we want, on what we think we can accomplish, that pride that says to God, “I'm a good person” – that pride is really warfare against God. Every time we put what we want or what we think ahead of what God says, we've just lobbed another spiritual hand grenade at God. Every time we sin, we've just shouted our hatred and contempt at him. God's response is to counterattack and send us to hell with the rest of his enemies. But when Jesus died and rose, he ended the warfare. He made peace between us and God. He erased God's hatred for us and our sin. And when he entered our hearts and gave us faith, he moved us over to God's side. That unbeliever inside us still throws those grenades and shouts those insults, but he's not in charge anymore. The believer is. He belongs to God. He takes comfort in the peace the Great Shepherd has won.

Our Great Shepherd cares for the sheep. A shepherd sacrifices his comfort, his convenience, even his life for the good of the sheep. He does everything for their benefit because he treasures those sheep. Jesus treasures us. He cares for us every day that we are here. He controls our lives so that we will be reach eternal life. All that is wrapped up in what happened on that first Easter. **The Great Shepherd came back from the dead.**

## II.

Good Shepherd Sunday is all about Jesus. It's all about what he has done and what he is still doing. But it is all about what he has done *for us*. The writer to the Hebrews says, **“May the God of peace ... equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever.”** Now that he has come and given us faith, the Great Shepherd equips us – he trains us to do his work.

That's kind of a funny picture to use with sheep, don't you think? You don't train sheep to work. They don't pull plows. They don't thresh grain. Even in the ancient world, they didn't do those things. You don't teach sheep to do tricks. They aren't smart enough or even physically able to jump through hoops or to do back flips or to heel or lie down on command. Sheep are just there. They eat. They drink. They grow. But our Great Shepherd does something that no shepherd of this life does: he trains the sheep.

The sheep, of course, are us. After all that I just said about sheep, you might not consider that to be a compliment. Indeed, if someone calls people sheep, he usually means they're stupid and they just follow along blindly without ever thinking about what they're doing or where they're going. God calls us sheep because spiritually speaking, we are helpless by nature. We are stupid and lost and blind without him. But Jesus comes into our hearts through the gospel and he changes us. He opens our eyes and we see things we never saw before. He trains us to live new and holy lives. The gospel message about Jesus and his love makes us want new and different things. The love that God has shown us makes us want to love him. It makes us want to live for him.

That Great Shepherd of the sheep controls our lives so that day by day, we grow. That means that not everything is easy. Learning is work. Think how much sweat and effort the kids in our school put into learning academic lessons or even sports lessons. Life lessons, spiritual lessons, require a great deal more effort. Growing requires challenges and obstacles – even pain at times. But not every hurt or every obstacle is equally good, so our Mega Shepherd decides what we have to face and what we don't. Always, he's working to strengthen our faith and bring us home. Always, he's working to prepare us for our next day of life here in this world. Tomorrow, God willing, we will be more able to live for Jesus than we are today.

He is working to bring about a total change in our lives and in our character. That would scary if we had to do it ourselves. The sinner inside us believes that we're good enough already. But the believer inside us knows better. The conscience that God built into us condemns us every time we put sin and selfishness first. In this life, we have no choice but to admit that we cannot be the Christians God calls us to be. But the Great Shepherd doesn't expect us to make ourselves those Christians. He does expect us to apply ourselves. He does expect us to hear his word and come to communion and to examine our lives and to repent of the sins we are guilty of. He does expect us to work every day to impose self-discipline on our lives. But the change doesn't come from us. It comes from him. It comes through the message of forgiveness won at the cross.

And God promises that change is real. He promises that change is coming. When you are frustrated because you aren't changing fast enough, don't beat yourself up. That's trying to change yourself. Go back to God's promises. That's the power. Go back to his love. That's where the change comes from. And trust that he will continue to work for you because that's what shepherds do. They put the good of the sheep first. **The Great Shepherd equips the flock.**

We throw that word "great" around way too much in America today. Athletes are great. Musicians are great. Friends are great. Sometimes, those people are no more than fairly good, but we like overstatement. Well, God was not overstating anything when he called Jesus the Mega Shepherd, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep. There is no greater shepherd we could ever have. Thank God for him and his love. Amen.