

Jeremiah 23:1-6 (NIV 1984)

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. ² Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the LORD.

³ “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. ⁴ I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the LORD.

⁵ “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.

Dear followers of the God who know God's justice and live in God's forgiveness. Amen

Do you remember hearing about that mayor of Toronto, Canada a few years ago? What an embarrassment! Alleged alcohol and drug abuse, driving under the influence, propositioning employees, filthy language, knocking down a female city council woman. He's not the first bad leader in history. Corrupt politicians take bribes or do anything to get elected. Unfaithful pastors or priests don't teach what God says, or commit scandalous sins. Some parents abuse, or neglect the physical and spiritual needs of their children. Leaders God established to bring blessings to others and protect them from harm neglect their duties and sin against those they lead. We've got such leaders in America in the church, state, school, and home. And they had them in Judah in about 500 BC, too. How can this go on? Is there no remedy? There is. God sees and God knows and God takes action. God promised his people he'd send the Shepherd / King. Normally, it's not good to mix metaphors. Kings don't rule flocks; shepherds do. But God's Messiah combines the best characteristics of a humble, faithful, self-sacrificing shepherd and a mighty, caring king. Today, Jeremiah tell us that:

Sermon Theme: Jesus Is Our Shepherd

- 1. He gathers his sheep**
- 2. He sends us faithful shepherds**
- 3. He rules righteously**

The 70-year Babylonian Captivity had begun. Jeremiah was preaching to those left in the Southern Kingdom, Judah, while Ezekiel preached to those exiled in Babylon. In Chapter 23 of his book, Jeremiah

delivered God's call to Judah's leaders to repent. First, he was speaking to the last kings of Judah: Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, who had proven to be wicked leaders. They had continued Israel's sin of idolatry. They had built luxurious palaces with unpaid Jewish slave labor, which God had forbidden. But Jeremiah's scathing indictment could also have been directed at false prophets who lead Jews to worship the false gods of the Canaanites, to apostate priests who conducted worship but allowed idols in God's temple, and to parents not teaching their children to fear and love the God of Israel.

God told those corrupt leaders: **“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!... the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: ‘Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done’” (1-2).** God gave these leaders the responsibility to be like shepherds taking care of God's people. They had failed. Instead of gathering the flock to protect them, they had neglected and scattered them. Their poor leadership contributed to the spiritual rebellion of Judah's people, and the LORD didn't let it go on indefinitely. God's people strayed like self-willed, rebellious sheep. They shut their ears to faithful prophets like Moses who gave warning. Moses told them that if they rejected the LORD, Canaan would vomit them out, as it had the Canaanites for their unbelief, idolatry, and sexual sins. God announced his verdict with a play on words: You did evil by not bestowing care on them, so I will bestow punishment on you. God used cruel Babylonians to carry off his people, but Judah's leaders were the main cause.

We complain about our leaders who don't lead the way God wants them to lead. Through Jeremiah, God is calling them to repent today. But let's examine whether you and I have been unfaithful shepherd-kings, too. Have we sinned as parents by failing to feed God's lambs nourishing spiritual food every day? Have we protected them, shown how to run from the spiritual wolves who'll attack them with error? Have we warned them to resist and flee from the serpent by Word and prayer? Have we been good leaders of the congregation—seeking straying and lost sheep, or do we care more about being safe and comfortable, wanting to be served instead of serving?

God sent Judah into Captivity in Babylon because of their sins and idolatry. He wanted every person in that nation to repent. When you're unhappy about your leaders, instead of complaining, repent of your own sins first. In place of continual complaints, pray for your nation, its leaders, and for spiritual revival. Thank God for faithful leaders. Pray for your spiritual leaders. Pray for men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, who love God and his Word, faithful shepherds to gather, feed, lead, protect, and seek God's sheep, especially when they sin and stray from the flock.

People left behind in Judah saw their parents, children, and the brightest and best in every field ripped from their homes, relatives, jobs, and nation. No doubt some were asking “Will God forgive? Will the exiles ever return? Can God free them? Does he know what's going on? Does he care? Does he even exist?” And God's people suffering under unfaithful shepherds in their nation, home, and church ask similar questions. They get angry at bad leaders and the injustice and suffering they cause. They may get angry at God. They may say, “What's the use? I might as well give up and die.”

God tells Judah. ‘I am noticing. I will punish evil, corrupt, negligent leaders. Don't worry about it or take revenge. Trust me. I've got your back. Take a longer view of things—because after what these

leaders have brought, **“I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number” (3)**. Jeremiah also prophesied God would bring back a small number of exiles after 70 years. God kept that promise. He gathered and brought back the remnant to the lush pastures of Canaan. They rebuilt Jerusalem, its walls, and the Temple. But they never regained their former prosperity.

2. He Sends Us Faithful Shepherds

The LORD promised to replace unfaithful shepherds. **“I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,’ declares the Lord.” (4)**. Perhaps you know some of those new leaders God appointed for his people: Ezra, the scribe, governors Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, Joshua, the high priest, and prophets Haggai and Zechariah. The nation didn’t become great again and for centuries was subject to a succession of foreign powers. But believers returning from exile had leaders who proclaimed God’s true Word, put God first, encouraged people to obey him, and reminded those they led not to fear because their faithful LORD was still ruling nations, even if Judah wasn’t as prosperous.

If you gripe about evil and weak leaders, remember: God is still sending faithful shepherds and kings in the nation, church, and family. Some work hard to keep you physically safe and free. Some preach law and gospel to lead you to repent of your sins and believe in your Savior. Every week you are privileged to hear your shepherds tell you “Fear not” because they bring you good tidings of great joy as they tell you about your Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for the sheep. He’ll go with you comforting you with his rod and staff even when you walk through Death’s Shadow Valley. The Good Shepherd gathered you into the flock of the church and none of his elect will be missing on Judgment Day.

3. He Rules Righteously

The return from Captivity in Babylon and the faithful shepherd/king/leaders the LORD gave his people pointed to a greater deliverance and greater shepherd-king. **“The days are coming... when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.” (5-6)**. God was saying, “Judah, are you frustrated with the state of your country? Are you lamenting the wicked shepherd kings who have destroyed your nation? I’ll bring you back in 70 years and give you good shepherd-kings. But that’s not the most important thing I will do. Someday I will send the best king from David’s line. One of David’s descendants will come like a strong, life-giving branch from the seemingly dead stump of David’s family. He will be righteous. He will never sin. He will rule wisely.” Even good earthly kings make bad or wrong decisions. They do things and pass laws that hurt their people. Not this king. He will make spiritual Israel safe from the devil, protect them from the world, and enable them to overcome their sin-defiled hearts.

Who is this king? You know him well. **“This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness” (6).** The Holy Spirit reveals that name to us: The LORD, Our Righteousness. He will be a man who will come from David. Like David, he will not impress anyone by his looks or status. But he will also be the LORD, Jahweh—eternal, almighty, all-knowing, perfectly-holy and righteous God. Righteous—before he becomes man, when he’s born, during his 33 years on earth, though men accuse him of evil crimes and execute him. Righteous—as he dies, shows his victory in hell, rises, ascends, and sits at God’s right hand. Righteous from eternity to eternity.

But as Luther demonstrated: what’s the comfort in that—that my shepherd/glorious king is righteous? I’m not. I’m a damnable sinner. I sin every day and deserve nothing but punishment. Notice the world of comfort in this tiny three-letter word: OUR. The LORD Our Righteousness. That’s his name. That’s what God tells us to call him. That’s what he’s all about. Not just being righteous or living righteously. That still would be an example we could never live up to. But shepherd/king Jesus, is OUR Righteousness, declaring US righteous. He gives us his holiness and perfection. He accomplished something God said no normal man could accomplish: **“No man can redeem his brother or give to God a ransom for him” (Psalm 49:7).** But God’s Son could. God’s Son, Jesus Christ the righteous one, did. He gives us his righteousness as a free gift we don’t have to earn. We are not righteous by being righteous, by obeying every commandment all our lives. The record of our sins is indisputable and condemning, but **“...we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1).** He can point to his righteous life and say, “Father, credit my righteousness to this poor sinner who hasn’t been and can’t be righteous on his or her own. Count this poor sinner righteous because I paid the precious-enough ransom you required with my innocent death.”

In troubled times, when we often look in vain for faithful earthly shepherd/kings, be assured that we have what we are looking for, need desperately, and more. We have a faithful shepherd/king, Christ the King. Our God identifies him for us: **“This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.”** Fear not. You’re safe. Even with bad leaders, you have a wise, prosperous king. He will never let you down. He delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. A thousand years later he used Persian King Cyrus to send a remnant back to Judah from slavery in Babylon. Best of all, David’s righteous Branch, the LORD Our Righteousness, your Shepherd-King, has freed you from slavery you deserved for your sins. Trust in him. Receive, honor, and obey him as your Shepherd / King. Amen.