

The Shepherd King

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Christmastime is here. The season is up and running!

We have a lot of that with all the finals and the papers and all the work to do. But if you're not a student, well, December is also what? It's the end of the work quarter, the end of the year. So there are numbers to hit and reports to write and deadlines to manage. We feel pulled in a million different directions. We're very scattered. Well, our sermon text today is Jeremiah 23. That's page 609, 609 in the Pew Bible. If you'd like to turn there with me. And in this text, written in the 6th century B.C., Jeremiah speaks a message of hope and comfort to a scattered people. He speaks of the coming Messiah, the coming King, who will gather His scattered people and who will keep them secure. So let me pray, and then I will read Jeremiah 23, verses 1 through 8.

[1 : 31] Father, as another Christmas season begins, we confess that our hearts are pulled in many directions. We are scattered and preoccupied. But in this moment here, this morning, by Your Spirit, allow us to hear Your message of truth, of hope, of comfort.

Let the eyes of our hearts see You and Your Son, Jesus Christ. And would we receive Your Word by faith and live as people who know the true and living God.

Father, it is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. All right, Jeremiah 23, 1 through 8, says this, 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.

[3 : 59] So consider first in verses 1 through 4 the fact that God will gather His scattered people. In verses 1 through 2 we see that the people are scattered, and in verse 3 God promises that He will gather them back to their fold.

Now here in Jeremiah, why are the people scattered? Well, they're scattered because they have shepherds who do not care for them, shepherds who destroy and drive them away, who don't attend to them or care for them as they should.

Now who are these shepherds that Jeremiah is talking about? Well, in the Old Testament, the shepherd language was a common metaphor for kings and for leaders.

In 2 Samuel chapter 5 verse 2, the tribes of Israel say to David, In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the Lord said to you, You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.

So that's just one of many examples where kings and princes and leaders are called shepherds of the people. And it's easy to see why kings and leaders would be described as shepherds, right?

[5 : 13] Because God intended for those in authority to guide and care for and protect the people that they led, just like an actual shepherd would do for their literal sheep.

They would protect them and care for them, and as Psalm 23 says, guide them to still waters and make them lie down in green pastures. We see God's ideal for kings and leaders a little earlier in Jeremiah chapter 22 verse 3, where God says, Hear the word of the Lord, O King of Judah, who sits on the throne of David, you and your servants and your people who enter these gates.

Thus says the Lord, Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed, and do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.

So a king, a ruler, a prince, someone in authority who upheld justice and righteousness, who cared for the well-being of the most vulnerable in society.

That was God's ideal. But sadly, this was not the case for the people in Jeremiah's day. Those kings cared more about increasing their own wealth and comfort than for promoting justice and righteousness in the land and for caring for the best interest of the people.

[6 : 45] And now, in the sixth century, the looming Babylonian empire was going to come and scatter the nation into exile.

But these sheep that are scattered, Jeremiah says in this chapter, God sees them. And even though the exile comes as part of God's judgment on wayward and rebellious Israel, God says, I will gather them.

I will be a shepherd to them. I will bring them home. They will be fruitful and multiply. That is, I will bring them home so that they can live into that creational calling for which I have made humans to flourish and thrive.

They shall fear no more, nor be dismayed. Neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. Not one of his scattered sheep will be lost.

Not one will be missing, declares the Lord. Now, I think we need to hear this promise today, don't we? Perhaps some of you know what it's like to suffer under bad leadership.

[8 : 12] Maybe you had parents who didn't care well for you. Or maybe you've been in churches where leadership has failed. Or perhaps in your work, you've buckled under the weight of bad management or careless, unethical bosses.

Whatever it is, corrupt politicians, self-seeking civil servants, harsh religious leaders, absent, uncaring family members.

Maybe you know all too well what it's like to be scattered and even scarred by bad shepherds. But God, friends, God is a God who gathers.

God is a shepherd who gathers. Listen to how the other prophets speak to this great truth about the one true God. Isaiah 40, verses 9 through 11 says, Go up on a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news.

Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up. Fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might and His arm rules for Him.

[9 : 31] But then listen how this mighty and strong God is described. 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.

Or listen to Ezekiel 34, verses 11 through 16. Again, speaking in a similar time period as Jeremiah where the leadership had failed miserably. The shepherds of the people had been terrible shepherds.

But the Lord comes and says, 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 I will seek out my sheep and I will rescue them from all places where they've 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.

[10 : 50] I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. And I myself will make them lie down declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strayed.

I will bind up the injured. And I will strengthen the weak. What a beautiful picture of God who gathers in full assurance that He will always have your best in mind.

Now let's apply these first few verses. And first I think these verses tell us to to beware actually of false shepherds.

There are leaders and rulers and people in authority who do not have our best in mind. Who are more concerned with their own status and wealth than they are with God's justice and righteousness. Who are more concerned with catering to the interests of the powerful and the

wealthy than for caring for the vulnerable and the least.

And Jeremiah is telling us watch out for rulers like that. Their words may sound appealing. Their words may even have a religious ring to them. You know, the leaders in Jeremiah's day were confident that God would rescue them from Babylon.

[12:02] They were quoting all sorts of promises from the Bible that said God would never forsake His people. But you know, those leaders didn't care one bit for obedience to God's Word.

Nor did they care about caring for God's people. So they were willing to quote religious phrases when it was convenient for them and their agenda. But they did not have God's heart for His people. So beware, Jeremiah says. But at the same time, aren't these verses also telling us not to fret over false shepherds?

Why? Because Jeremiah says God sees them and God will bring them to account. At the end of verse 2, there's this play on words. The word attend in the Hebrew can be used both positively and negatively.

God says to the evil shepherds, you've not attended to My people, so I'm going to attend to you in judgment. It's sort of like our phrase take care of someone.

[13:06] You know how that can be sort of positive and negative? You know, God says, you didn't take care of My people, so I'm going to take care of you. So, brothers and sisters, don't fret over bad shepherds.

You don't have to grind away in fear and anxiety and worry and bitterness and hatred. Why?

Because God sees. God will call them to account. God will judge justly.

We can entrust that judgment to Him. And focus on living righteously and loving our neighbors as ourself. One more application in these first few verses. And I think it's this.

Pray for good under shepherds. In verse 4, God says, I will set shepherds over them who will care for them. Now, we see this promise partially fulfilled in the very Old Testament itself.

God did fulfill His promise in a partial way and brought back the people of Judah and Israel from the Babylonian exile. And when He brought them back from the Babylonian exile, He did raise up good leaders like Zerubbabel, the governor, like Joshua, the priest at that time, like Ezra, the teacher of God's word, like Nehemiah, the builder of Jerusalem's walls.

[14:27] And the same is true today as God continues to gather His sheep from every tribe and every nation through the proclamation of the gospel. God continues to make good on this promise to raise up good under shepherds who can care well for the people, pastors and elders and deacons and small group leaders who love and lead and feed God's people through the Scriptures.

And we should, all of us, pray for our leaders, pray that they would live lives of holiness and righteousness, pray that they would teach and understand God's word rightly, pray that they would have wisdom and love to care for God's people well.

But we should pray not just for church leaders. Paul in 1 Timothy says we should pray for leaders of all kinds. In 1 Timothy chapter 2, 1 through 2, Paul writes, first of all then, I urge that supplications and prayers and intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may live a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

So we should pray for our civil leaders and we should pray for our bosses and our managers.

Children, you should pray for your parents. Pray for these under shepherds that they would fear and love God and exercise their authority in a way that brings blessing and care and flourishing to all those that they serve.

So first, God gathers the scattered. But second, Jeremiah says, God will keep them secure.

[16:18] They will dwell in safety and won't be scattered again. God will keep them secure. But how? How? How will God accomplish this?

Well, in verses 5 and 6, Jeremiah tells the people that an even better shepherd is coming. The true shepherd who will reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In other words, this king, this shepherd will be righteous through and through. All of his ways will be perfect and just and caring. He will be everything that the former kings and leaders of Israel and Judah and every human society has failed to be.

Jeremiah says he will be a righteous branch out of the line of David. Now, that word branch, right, is obviously a plant metaphor.

It's a tree metaphor. That word in Hebrew means a shoot. It's new growth out of the old. You know, maybe you've seen that for yourself.

[17 : 36] You have an old plant that seems like it's about dead. Those are most of the plants in my life at my home, at my office. I have a fake tree in my office so that I never have to water. It's brilliant.

But maybe you've seen kind of these old plants of yours about dead. And then, to your great surprise, a new stalk, a new branch grows out, green and full of life.

Isaiah uses a very similar metaphor as Jeremiah. In Isaiah chapter 11, verse 1, Isaiah says, there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse.

That's David's house. And a branch from his roots, from David's roots, shall bear fruit. Notice how Isaiah describes the house of David, that royal house in Israel.

He calls it a stump. It's cut down. It's lifeless. That's how Isaiah and Jeremiah talk about the house of David and by implication, all human rulers.

[18 : 40] But, you see, through these two prophets, God is telling us that merely human authority, merely human rulers, they will never be the sort of king, the sort of shepherd that we need.

But he says, out of something dead, God will bring life. out of the old, he will bring something new. Out of something that looks seemingly impossible, God will make it possible. And so, out of the stump of David, God says, a branch will come, a righteous branch, a new shepherd who will always do what is right.

And how did God bring this true and better shepherd, this righteous branch of new growth into the world? Well, as we turn to the pages of the New Testament, we see that the Messiah, the King, the shepherd, Jesus, came into the world conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.

Out of the old comes new. Out of the impossible, comes the possible. And as we follow Jesus' life in the Gospels, what do we see?

[20 : 12] How does Jesus use His authority and power? Does He use it to build His own wealth and prestige? Does He amass an army?

Does He take over territory? Does He pillage and plunder? Not at all. Rather, Jesus, the good shepherd cares for the weak and the vulnerable and the poor.

And He calls a group of followers of disciples and He tells them, blessed are the meek and the gentle and the peacemakers. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

And this true and better shepherd, He gathers. He gathers the lost sheep back into the fold of God. In Matthew 11, Jesus says, Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

[21 : 20] Can you imagine that? Yes, Jesus is a shepherd. He's a king with authority, but to come under this king's authority, it brings lightness and ease.

Jesus says, All you who have been scattered and scarred by uncaring, unjust shepherds, come. Hear the words of the true and better shepherd, the righteous branch, the true king of David.

He says, I'm gentle and lowly in heart. Come to Me and I'll give you rest. And Jesus says that when you come to Him, come under His loving authority, He says, you'll find rest for your souls.

Rest for your souls. Not scattered anymore, not thrown and tossed and burdened and bruised and preoccupied, but rest for your souls.

But how does this true and better shepherd bring this rest? Jeremiah tells us in verse 6, And this is the name by which He will be called.

[22 : 37] The Lord is our righteousness. You see, Jesus, our true and better shepherd, isn't just righteous in Himself.

He is the righteous branch, but He's more than that. He has also become our righteousness. Our righteousness.

And friends, this brings us to the heart of the gospel, the central message of the Scriptures. The Scriptures tell us that there's no one who's righteous before God.

Romans 3.23 says, all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. To imagine that we can have enough righteousness within us to be accepted by God and to have true rest for our souls is to be deluded.

1 John 1.8 says, If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. And so, because of that, we must look outside of ourselves to another.

[23 : 49] We must look to the righteousness of another. And there's only one person who lived a life of perfect righteousness. Jesus Christ, God the Son, the second person of the one triune God who became flesh and assumed a fully human nature so that His righteousness could become, as Jeremiah says, our righteousness.

We don't find rest for our souls through trusting in ourselves. We only find it by trusting in Jesus Christ.

By the grace of God, the righteousness that Jesus maintained becomes ours as we're united to Him by faith. And believers have the righteousness of Christ imputed to them, credit to them as a gift. And our record then, because of the righteousness of another, our record then becomes spotless and clean and perfect.

And that becomes the basis of our assurance. And that is how we can dwell safely, securely, forever, Jeremiah says.

[25 : 11] That's how God keeps us completely and utterly secure. God accepts us on the grounds of the perfect righteousness of Christ, received by faith alone. Jesus, the good shepherd, is the Lord our righteousness.

What a gift. So two applications then as we conclude. First, friends, if you have not done so, receive this true and better shepherd.

He says, come to me and I'll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and you'll find rest for your souls. He freely offers His righteousness to all who believe. And if you haven't done that, what are you waiting for?

Are there questions you need to resolve about the truthfulness and the historicity of these things that the Scriptures say about Jesus? Are there questions you need to resolve?

Well then, friend, waste no time in searching them out. Or maybe it's simply that you realize that your life will change if you give your life to this true and better shepherd.

[26 : 31] Do you fear surrendering your life to Him? But friend, what other shepherd could you trust more than Him?

Here's a shepherd who left heaven to come and gather you to Himself and to gather you home.

Here's a shepherd who promises that not one of His sheep will go missing.

In a parable, Jesus says that He's like a shepherd who would leave the 99 to go search after the one far in the far country and upon finding that one would put them on His own shoulders and rejoice bringing them home and all heaven would rejoice.

Here's a shepherd who not only lived a perfect life for you but a shepherd who laid down His life for you. You know, when the wolves of condemnation and sin and fear came for the sheep, Jesus stood firm and He died on a cross so that no sin and no condemnation and no guilt would ever be able to stand against His sheep because He paid that penalty for them.

There is no greater shepherd than the Lord Jesus. In trusting Him, you have nothing to fear and everything to gain. But lastly, for those of us who have come to see Jesus as our true and greater shepherd, remember that He has a mission for us.

[28 : 15] Matthew 9 says, Jesus went through all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. Then it says, when He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

Then He said to His disciples, the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.

You see, friends, we are being sent by our great shepherd into the world to proclaim His kingdom, to care for the vulnerable and the afflicted, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and to see with His own eyes the fields that are ripe for harvest.

There are still so many who are like sheep without a shepherd. Pray that God might use us as bearers of good news and that through our labors God might gather yet more to Christ our good shepherd, that we might live in such a way that gives evidence to the world that there is a better king and there is a better shepherd to live under.

Now, why can we do this work with joy and with confidence? Well, again, because God has already promised that not one of His sheep shall be missing.

[29 : 54] He knows all of His sheep by name and as we go forth living and proclaiming this good news, God promises that His sheep will surely hear the shepherd's voice and be saved.

Our part is simply to tell this good news with all the joy and wisdom He gives and God will gather His sheep and they will find rest for their souls in the arms of our great shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray together. Father, we praise You for giving us, Jesus, the shepherd we need who is not just righteous in Himself but who provides that much-needed righteousness for us that we might find rest for our souls and be right with You, our God.

So help us, Father, to live lives worthy of this good news. Help us to take Jesus' yoke upon us and go forth as laborers into the harvest seeking first Your kingdom and Your righteousness.

Father, we pray that You would do this gathering work in our midst. Make good on Your promise that not one shall be missing. Father, gather all of Your sheep to Yourself.

[31 : 18] It's in Jesus' mighty name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.