

## The Lord is Our Righteousness

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Old Testament reading, Jeremiah chapter 23. **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.** Here ends our text.

There once were some shepherds who were appointed by a master to take care of his flock. But they were lazy and careless in their duties. Every morning they drove the sheep downhill among the rocks and briars. The sheep scattered about, foraging on weeds and thistles. They drank from the trickle of water that was runoff from the manure in the sheep pen above. Many of them became sick and weak. Those that couldn't find their way back to the fold at night were eaten by wild beasts. Their blood ran down the hill. The master returned one day and found many of his sheep missing. He found their slain and dead carcasses scattered in the valley of death below. He was very angry. He said, "Woe to you wicked shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture. You have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds." The master got rid of those shepherds. He said, "I will appoint shepherds over them who will care for them, who will lead them up to the green pastures and clear waters, who will protect them from harm. I will set my son over them as their shepherd because he is a righteous man and he loves the sheep. No longer will any be missing."

The twelve tribes of Israel were scattered about like sheep. Their loyal priest and prophet Samuel had died. Their king Saul had rejected the word of God. But God had raised up a new shepherd to lead them, a man after his own heart. His name was David. David had been a good shepherd who cared for his sheep. He led them to green pastures and fresh water. Whenever a lion or bear attacked the flock, he rescued the sheep, striking the beast with his rod or slaying it with his sling. God anointed David king over his people. David united the tribes and fought for them in battle. He was a righteous man who ruled with wisdom and justice. Under him, the people dwelled securely.

But in the days of the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord's sheep were again scattered. Unrighteous king after unrighteous king had driven the ten northern tribes of Israel away from the clean waters of God's word at the temple to the putrid waters of idolatry. The nation of Assyria ravaged and destroyed the flock and scattered them among the nations. And now a string of unrighteous kings had brought the southern tribes of Judah to the brink of destruction. Kings that neglected to call upon the Lord at the temple. Kings that worshipped false gods at the high places and sacrificed their own sons in the fire. Kings that even dared to burn the word of God written from Jeremiah's hand.

God saw how the flock of his people were scattered and destroyed. He was angry. He cried out against those unrighteous kings, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture. You have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds." The Babylonians besieged Jerusalem. The last wicked king, Zedekiah, fled with a bodyguard, but *his* soldiers were scattered. The beasts of Babylon killed his three sons in front of him, and then put out Zedekiah's eyes and led him in chains to Babylon. Woe to you wicked shepherds.

But the Lord promised through the prophet Jeremiah, "I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold. 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." And just like the Lord raised up the shepherd David to be king, God also promised that he would raise up a righteous Branch from David. This shepherd shall reign as king and rule wisely and justly. Under him the people would dwell secure. His name would be "The Lord is our righteousness."

In our Gospel lesson the apostles returned to see Jesus. They told him about all the things he had sent them to do and teach to his flock. The apostles were tired, so Jesus led them away by boat to a desolate place for some rest. But the sheep were so desperate for a shepherd that they followed after Jesus on foot and met him as he stepped out of the boat. Jesus looked out over the crowds. He had compassion

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Jeremiah 23:1-6

on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He taught them many things that day. And then when evening came, he fed them all from the five loaves and two fish. God the Father raised up a new shepherd for his sheep. He set over them his Son, Jesus Christ. Because he loved the sheep, Jesus would execute justice and righteousness in the land. Under him the sheep would dwell secure.

Now maybe sometimes you've felt like a sheep without a shepherd. It seems we're often ruled by unrighteous kings and leaders. We're left to forage through life on our own. We look around us at work and many of our fellow sheep turn up missing. They've been slashed from the payroll. Neglect and greed and self-serving interests seem to rule the day. The unborn are sacrificed to the god of convenience and irresponsibility. The elderly are valued only for their utility until their carcass is flung on the rocks below. Alternate lifestyles are pushed upon us, but we see people dying in their own filth and disease. Where is the justice? Where are the righteous rulers? Woe to you shepherds.

You look around you in the pew today and see some empty spaces. Some are missing. Many have been driven by the Law to seek spiritual self sufficiency on their own. They drink from the filthy waters of their own works. Their shepherd is negligent and hasn't guided them back to God's fold. The wild beast, the devil, has devoured them. Their soul lies like a dead carcass among the rocks and thorns. Woe to you shepherds. Woe to me.

But how many people could pronounce the same woe to you? Have you always been a righteous ruler and shepherd to those in your care? You have people under your employment. Have you always been fair and just in their work and wages? You have elderly parents and relatives. Have you visited them and seen to their needs? You have children under your roof. Have you taught them God's word and ways or have you let them go their own way?

You see, often times *we* are the unrighteous rulers and shepherds. We've neglected those under our care at work or at home. We've ruled unjustly. We haven't been a shepherd to our neighbor. We haven't taught our own children the way to the fold. Woe to us. We are so unrighteous. Because we haven't attended to others, *will* God attend to us for our evil deeds?

There was another unjust ruler, named Pontius Pilate. He neglected his duty and allowed an innocent sheep to be slaughtered by beasts. This sheep was beaten and impaled upon the cross. His blood flowed like a stream down the hill of Mount Calvary. His name was "The Lord is our righteousness." But because he is truly righteous, God the Father raised up this his own Son, Jesus Christ, to reign as king. In wisdom and justice he reigns over all rulers, even the wicked and unrighteous ones. As king and ruler, he now executes justice and righteousness in the land. His woes fall on all unjust shepherds who neglect and scatter his flock. On the Last Day Jesus will come and judge the living and the dead.

But Jesus looks upon his flock and has compassion on us who are like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus comes with his rod and staff to comfort and protect us. If we'd continue to drink from the putrid stream of our own unrighteousness, we'd die. But when we drink from that river of blood from Calvary, the river of his blood and righteousness, we live. Because of Jesus, God no longer attends to our evil deeds. Jesus washes us clean in baptism. He forgives our sins when he feeds us with his body and blood. He sees us as righteous for the Lord is our righteousness. God sees us as righteous because Jesus is our righteousness. God sees us as righteous through faith in Christ.

And today Jesus the good shepherd gathers the remnant of his flock from all countries and brings them to his fold. Sheep from every land and country he gathers into his fold. He brings you into his fold. He sets shepherds over us who care for us, who lead us up to the green pastures and pure waters of his Gospel. He uses these undershepherds like the apostles to teach and feed his flock with the Word of God. And so, we're no longer scattered, dying from our own unrighteousness and devoured by the devil. The Lord has rescued us, his sheep. He's beaten death and slain our sin. In him we are saved and dwell secure for the Lord is our righteousness. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.