

**Jeremiah 23:2-6 (NIV 1984) <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>“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. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>“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. <sup>6</sup>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.**

Slaughter houses experience issues with getting animals such as sheep to the place where they can be butchered. They don't want the animals to get all worked up and tense. Then the meat won't be as tender. They don't want to go up the ramp to the place of their execution. They will mill about in confusion, desperately looking for someone to show them the way out. To overcome the issue many butchers use what is called a Judas-goat. This creature will mill about with the sheep until they feel comfortable following. Then he leads them to follow up the ramp to the place of the slaughter. With the sheep walking to their doom, the Judas-goat finds the hidden door and walks away unharmed while the sheep go to their unsuspecting death.

It was no different in the times of Jeremiah and Jesus. Kings and leaders of the people were like the Judas-goat. They would lead the people to a dangerous place. They didn't teach the people about forgiveness of sins through the Savior. Confused people would follow these false shepherds to their doom, ready to follow the first person that seemed to know where to go. They would sheepishly follow any king that had a plan. To such a world came our Savior to rule with compassion and be the true leader. A King to follow as he shepherds.

What is it that a king does? I'm sure one of the things we know a king does is rules. We consider the power of the king as he is able to use all the wealth and strength of his people for the furthering of his kingdom. That is a normal reaction when we hear about a king. We think about a supreme ruler. The person with complete control that cannot be taken away.

When we look at Jesus, we are glad he is the king with almighty power. He as king rules to watch over us. He is a ruler as God intended. That rule probably goes against what we would normally think. We aren't use to kings using their power and control for the aid of others. But at the heart of a kingship is a responsibility above all else. A good king was not one who rules his people for his own benefit. A good king is one who watches over his people and looks out for their benefit. He guides and shepherds his people.

Jeremiah shows us the good and bad news. **"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. 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.** To those who would scatter his people God says, I will end you. To those who are Judas-goats who lead God's people astray. God says, I won't tolerate that! A good shepherd cannot stand by and see his sheep destroyed by some shepherd who doesn't really care for the sheep. God tells his shepherd to care for the sheep, not care for themselves.

And it is still bad news for lousy shepherds. Taking those words to heart, I wouldn't want to be a pastor today who is teaching lies to God's people and leading them astray. I wouldn't want to be a political leader who is using his or her position to promote godless philosophies that gather confused sheep into a different pasture than God's. I wouldn't want to be leading in any way that doesn't serve God. Because Jesus is still the King and the Shepherd of his people. He is still enthroned in heaven, watching over his flock. I would not want to be on the wrong side of my Shepherd-King when he gets angry!

But that's good news for the sheep, isn't it? **"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. 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.** God says his people are scattered all over the place. In fact, it says that he put them there.

Friends, the greatest fulfillment of this prophecy came through God who became man in Jesus Christ - our Good Shepherd. "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things." He taught them. He died for them. He trained his disciples and empowered them to go out in his name. From his throne in heaven, Jesus is still our shepherd-king. He provides pastors and teachers and good shepherds for his people. He jealously watches over his flock. In times of temptation, he stands between them and Satan. In times of weakness, he carries them in his arms. In times of death, he gathers them to his fold in heaven.

We don't need Judas-goats. We need a shepherd. Jesus is our shepherd-king! We need to follow as he shepherds. Under the care of Jesus and his faithful under-shepherds we **will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing.** Following Jesus' leadership is the only place where subjects of a King are saved.

If you need another reason to follow the King as he shepherds here's another. **"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. <sup>6</sup> 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.** The name of our Shepherd-King is the LORD our Righteousness. This is the special name God used for himself in the Bible. This is the LORD who came to promise the Savior. This is the LORD who protected his people. This is the LORD who saved his people countless times in the Old Testament and gathered his remnant into a flock.

Jesus is this LORD. He is the LORD. He is the branch from the line of David. This LORD became man to use his almighty power and control as King to save his people from sin and to bring righteousness.

It's easy to understand righteousness. Righteousness is what a person does when he does what is right. Jesus is called righteousness. He always does what is right. That means he never stumbled into sin. He never cursed or swore falsely. He never lusted, coveted, stole, doubted, or worried. He always told the truth. He was always content. And always was exactly as we are to be. Always did right.

Do you understand? Jesus never did anything wrong. Never. He didn't even come close to sinning because sin did not come into his mind or his imagination. We do that all the time. But Jesus never did.

Do you find that comforting or discomfoting? Discomfoting-if you are comparing yourself with Jesus. If you are trying to say that you can please God that is what it takes. You can't go your own way that leads to safety. Instead you will be afraid and missing. Jesus is righteous. If we compare ourselves to him and think we can fill his role, we can only be depressed.

But look at what God says about the LORD. OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. It says ours. Jesus wasn't a righteous shepherd and king just to show us up to be the unrighteous sinners that we are. Jesus is our righteousness.

If God says, "Did you keep the first commandment? Did you give me the glory only in your life? Did you love me with your heart and soul and mind?" You can say, "No, Lord, I didn't. I must confess my sins. I cannot hide them from you. But Jesus did. He always honored you. Even when he was dying on the cross and you had to forsake him and punish him, he still honored you. Right? Lord, it says right here that Jesus did that for me. He is the LORD our righteousness. So if you asked if I kept the first commandment, I would have to say, "yes." Jesus kept it for me!"

That means you don't need to follow after one of the Judas-goats. There are many. There always have been and always will be. But Jesus has compassion on you. When he sees you he looks at you as one of his subjects. He knows that he is your king. He will not fail at his task. Jesus is still our Shepherd and King. He will not leave you without his leadership and support. He will not leave you without his righteousness to make you right in the sight of God. He is a king to follow as he shepherds. Amen.