

To God Alone Be The Glory

Will you take a journey with me? It will be a journey of the mind. Let's go back to when you were in school. For some of us that was only last week. But this journey isn't going to be a vacation. I'd like you to think of your worst year in school. Not academically, but socially. Remember when students would pick on you, call you names, kick your books out of your hands, break your pencil, maybe even hurt you physically? If this kind of thing never happened to you, praise God, and play along as if it did. I want you to imagine your nemesis picking on you just as the principal comes around the corner. You've got a great principal. This principal knows just what to say to cut your opponent down to size without being cruel. The principal talks loud enough for everyone to hear. Your adversary is humbled without being humiliated. Off your enemy goes to the principal's office. It won't be long now before that student's parents are called for a trip to the school so they can make a home delivery.

If you have compassion in your heart, you don't want even your enemy to be punished without mercy. But when you have been picked on, it's really nice to get some relief. And it feels like vindication when your tormenters get what they have coming to them. You know what I'm talking about, right? You have a sense of justice, don't you? You can appreciate it when a bully gets

caught, when a nitpicker gets picked off, when a tyrant tastes a tidbit of tyranny. That's what the first part of today's Old Testament lesson is all about.

²This 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. WHAT A WONDERFUL SHEPHERD WE HAVE! He knows when his sheep are being mistreated. And he's not just going to sit there and do nothing while it happens. Just like when the principal caught your adversary in the hallway and raised his voice, and his words sounded sweet to you, so here the Lord addresses his disapproval toward spiritual punks, bullies, and bad examples. *"I will bestow punishment on you."* Sweet words for us, but they sound ominous, don't you think?, for anyone who goes against what the Lord wants. Unspecified punishment. How bad do you think it might be? Well, who is promising the punishment? The almighty God, the one who can do anything he wants. He who created the whole world in six days is powerful enough and clever enough to design just the right punishment for each evildoer.

Let's take this warning home to our hearts so we don't try to get away with secret evil. Do we really think that just because no one is looking, God doesn't

see us trying to be sneaky? I can understand why unbelievers think they are getting away with their shenanigans. Because God obscures himself to all but those who study the Bible and receive the Sacraments, unbelievers don't often think about the one true God. He's out of sight, out of mind. He rarely gives people what they deserve for stepping over the line.

Does it bother you that the wicked never get caught? Well, at least not nearly as often as we believers get caught. 'Us getting caught' shows how much God loves us and how dangerous a situation the unbelievers are in. Do you understand? See, when we get caught, God leads us to repent of our evil. And then he restores us. But when unbelievers don't get caught, the Lord is actually punishing them by letting them get away with evil (see Romans 1:18ff). "How is that punishment?" Because if they get away with a little evil, they'll try something worse. And if they get away with that, they'll try something even more wicked. Instead of having lives filled with God's blessings, their lives become emptier and emptier. [I recently read in Proverbs 4:19: "*The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not even know what makes them stumble.*"] Eventually their hearts will be so far away from God, they don't want to repent. They will be lost to God because of their own choices. So when you get caught in the act or in a lie, stop and thank God for loving you so much. Say,

"WHAT A WONDERFUL SHEPHERD I HAVE!"

Now maybe you're saying, "But here in Jeremiah, God is letting the wicked shepherds in on the secret." Well, yes. He actually wants them to repent too [and everyone!]. But the wicked shepherds were not interested in listening to Jeremiah or anyone else sent by the Lord. God tried, but the news of their impending demise remained hidden from them.

What exactly were the crimes committed by these evil shepherds? They *scattered* God's flock and drove them away and did *not bestow* care on them. There's a lesson here for everyone who is a leader or may become a leader of any of God's people. This would include all pastors, yes—pastor means shepherd. But in Bible times when people heard that their shepherd was protecting them, they thought of their king or their governor or even the general of the army. That was their shepherd. In our world the Lord is also talking to judges and police officers and legislators and professional athletes and teachers and doctors and nurses and executives. And let's not forget dads and moms, or anyone who might become one someday. Then there are older sisters and brothers who must set an example, and those who are now the oldest grade in their school and who therefore must set an example for the younger students. Hmm. I dare say just about everyone could benefit

from what God is teaching about godly leadership. Here is the lesson: don't bring any harm to anyone under you or less than you.

The easiest way to harm those who look up to you is to set them a bad example. Think of it. If the leaders can get away with doing wrong and not face any consequences, how long will it be before the people say, "Well, if he doesn't have to behave, why should I?" You see this on multilane highways. If one driver is going fast or getting ahead, someone else will follow the example. If you're setting a bad example, you are not leading people to know Jesus better. You are scattering God's flock and driving them away from the Lord. The Lord is **not** going to let you get away with such behavior. You must be exposed, or else eventually you'll lose your faith. And hell is a punishment you just don't want, especially when Jesus already suffered the equivalent of hell for us when he was on the cross. No, it's better for you to be caught so you can repent and be forgiven and escape a forever in hell. Do you see **WHAT A WONDERFUL SHEPHERD WE HAVE?** He warns us to avoid evil.

After promising punishment for those who refuse to repent, he promises peace for his people. Listen: ³*"I myself will gather the remnant of my flock."* As scary as it was to think about what punishments almighty God can design

for the unrepentant, so wonderful it is to think about the tenderness the Lord must have in his heart for each of us—and all because of Jesus. Isn't it amazing how he can keep track of everyone? And just when you need his help, he's there. When you call out to him for forgiveness, he's there. When you're happy or you accomplish something great, he's there to rejoice with you.

With as wonderful a shepherd as we have, you'd think there would be a huge flock of God's sheep. But instead it often seems like there are only a few who really love the Lord. Even the Lord refers to them as a remnant. But he never thinks, "So few have gathered! What's the use? It's not even worth trying bless these people." No, not our shepherd. He says, 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.* Of course, this part of the Bible was written to Israelites who had gone into exile (or were about to go). These believers felt abandoned by God because they got caught up in the punishment that God was handing out to all the other Israelites who turned away from him and refused to repent. They felt discarded. So here the Lord says, "Just hold on, my people. I will bring you back."

Isn't it neat how the Lord refers to his people as sheep? We are like sheep. It's really easy to make sheep worry—just like us. Sheep are mentally challenged. You can show them how to access God's blessings. But they won't do it. Just like people. You can teach them how to benefit the rest of the flock through certain behaviors, but it's easier to have teeth pulled than to convince certain sheep to think of the good of the whole flock. Just like people. To get sheep to be fruitful and increase in number, you must pour hours and hours of care into each one. Just like people. You have to convince them there's nothing to fear. "Look over here in this pasture, there's lots of fresh greens to eat, and no wolves or lions nearby to make you nervous. And I'm keeping an eye on the other sheep so no one cruelly butts you with a critical remark or a disapproving look." When sheep are free from all that, then they are fruitful and increase in number. Some of them will say to their friends and acquaintances: "WHAT A WONDERFUL SHEPHERD WE HAVE in Jesus! You should become part of our flock." And some of them say to each other, "You know, we each need to give some of our time to help our flock do better at ministry." This is what the Lord wants from us.

So he promises, *⁴I 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. The vast majority of pastors and teachers and staff ministers you have known took good care of the sheep and the lambs entrusted to them by the Lord. See how the Lord has kept his promise to you?

Where do the Lord's under-shepherds learn how to take good care of the flock? From the Lord himself! The Son of God left his heavenly throne and lived among us as Savior. Of course, when Jeremiah was telling God's people about their Savior, Jesus hadn't been born yet. So Jeremiah had to point into the future. *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. He will set a good example. He will carry out his duties to benefit his people rather than being selfish or unkind or cruel. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved, rescued from sin and hell by Jesus' death on the cross in their place. And Israel will live in safety. Think how seldom you get seriously hurt—the Lord protects us by his almighty power. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness."* Jesus lived a righteous life so he could give each of us credit, as if we had lived a righteous life. He is indeed the Lord Our Righteousness. WHAT A WONDERFUL SHEPHERD WE HAVE!