

Hebrews 13:7-8, 12-21

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Carefully consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

¹² Jesus suffered outside the gate for this reason: to sanctify people by his own blood. ¹³ So then let us go to him, outside of the camp, bearing his disgrace. ¹⁴ For we do not have a permanent city here, but we are looking for the city that is coming. ¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us constantly offer to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as men who will give an account. Obey them, so that they may do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no benefit to you. ¹⁸ Pray for us, because we are sure that we have a good conscience, and because in everything we want to conduct ourselves in an honorable way. ¹⁹ I urge you to do this even more, so that I may be restored to you quickly.

²⁰ Now may the God of peace—who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, in connection with his blood, which established the eternal testament— ²¹ may he equip you with every good thing to do his will, as he works in us what is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Dear Sheep of the Heavenly Shepherd,

When you hear the little mechanized voice from your GPS say: turn left in 500 feet, do you listen, or do you second guess the GPS system and take an alternate route? When you're in a strange and unfamiliar city, it's pretty hard to beat a GPS for leading you to your destination. I'm going to guess, though, that if you use a GPS in an area that you know well then there's probably been a time when you second-guessed the GPS and took a local shortcut. Perhaps, if you have an older model that doesn't automatically update the maps, you have even run into a place when the GPS is flat out wrong! The technology is always improving, but it's still not perfect. Sometimes you have to second guess what you are following!

The letter to the Hebrews was written to some Christians who were second guessing who they were following spiritually. For many years they had followed God as Old Testament believers – observing the Old Testament customs of sacrifices, festivals, and rituals as they awaited the promised Messiah. When they found out about Jesus, they had started following him, but that brought with it an entirely new set of challenges, because their Roman rulers didn't like Christianity. And so many started second-guessing the wisdom of following Jesus. What would be wrong with going back to the Old Testament way of doing things? They could follow the rituals, make the sacrifices, and generally feel good about themselves spiritually – and it would be a whole lot easier!

Have you ever found yourself second-guessing your spiritual guide – Jesus and his Word? Maybe it happened when, like the Hebrew Christians, you experienced opposition from a family member or a friend or a professor in college, and you found yourself wondering if Jesus really was the right way. Maybe the second guessing came when you realized that you were in the minority in our country, as so many scientists and academics and highly respected people opposed how Jesus leads his people. Maybe the second guessing started when you faced a tragedy in life that you struggled to understand. Or maybe it came when you

prayed for something for a long time – months, years, and God just didn't seem to be answering your prayer in the way that you thought he was going to, and you found yourself wondering if following Jesus was really the right path to be on. Today, the writer to the Hebrews prays that God's children would remember to:

Sermon theme: Follow Your Good Shepherd

- 1. He Leads You to Eternal Life, and**
- 2. He Equips You for Life.**

In his letter, the writer to the Hebrews reminds his readers that second-guessing God isn't something as harmless as thinking you know better than a GPS device and choosing an alternate route. If you want to get into heaven, you have to have a follow the route of Jesus and his payment of forgiveness for all our sins. The problem is that almost all spiritual ideas in the world address this problem in the wrong but same basic way – follow the right patterns, do the right things, offer the right sacrifices, and it will all turn out alright. It can even creep into our minds too – be a member of the right church, whether you go or not, show up on Sunday, even if you pay little attention, throw some money in the collection plate, even if it's just the leftovers in your wallet, and spiritually, it will all turn out just fine. This seems to make some sense, until you remember that the God who holds the key to heaven is the same God who says: **“the soul who sins [even once] is the one who will die.”** God's serious about that statement – so serious that he even created a terrible place called hell to punish everyone who sins. And if one evil thought slips in, if one hurtful word slips out, if one selfish act is committed or one kind deed is left undone, it doesn't matter how many sacrifices Hebrew Christians offered or how many times you signed the communion register or how much money or time was given up for your Savior – it's not perfect, and nothing less than perfect will do.

But all of that hopelessness stands in stark contrast to what Jesus said, **“I am the door. Whoever enters through me will be saved” (John 10:9)**. It's a promise different from anything else in the world. There is no payment to be made, there is no price to be extracted – whoever enters through Jesus will be saved. Today the writer to the Hebrews prays that his readers of every age would take Jesus at his word, because what Jesus brings to the table is far better than any sacrifice ever made. Unlike all those animal sacrifices of the Old Testament, it never needs to be repeated. Jesus death at the cross counted as payment for the sins of every person and every generation. That's why Jesus said, **“It is finished”** before he died – the sacrifice to end all sacrifices was complete, the debt was paid, and there's simply nothing that can compare!

On those days when we are tempted to wonder if it's really that simple or if it's really that free, we don't have to look any further than the title by which the writer to the Hebrews addresses God in his prayer. **“Now may the God of peace—who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, in connection with his blood, which established the eternal testament.”** When Jesus died he signed a covenant, a contract, between a holy God and sinful people. Jesus signed his side – our side really – in his precious blood shed at the cross, and God put his stamp of acceptance on it by raising Jesus from the dead! Because of that, there is no room for second guessing or doubts – God accepted the sacrifice Jesus made, he forgave our sins and threw open the doors of heaven, and there's nothing that can change that. We can follow our Good Shepherd with confidence, because he is the only one who leads us to eternal life.

The good news for our lives right now is that Jesus doesn't wait until the end of our lives to start leading us. We have a journey of days, weeks, months, and years before we get to that gate of heaven, and that journey isn't going to be without its hardships that make us wonder if we are on the right path at all. I'm sure there were days when the Hebrew Christians watched helplessly as children, friends, and relatives

turned away from Jesus for an easier path. I'm sure there were days when they tried to speak up but lost their nerve and went home with hearts filled with regret, wondering if they were of any value to Jesus' kingdom. Maybe you've watched a child or a friend or a relative turn away from following the Good Shepherd. Maybe you've tried to share your faith with a co-worker, but your nerves failed, or you were met with mocking rebuke. Maybe it's more general than that and you find yourself wondering whether or not you are really in God's flock or are actually worth anything in God's kingdom!

If any of those or similar thoughts have crossed your mind, then the writer to the Hebrews is writing his prayer for you: **“Now may the God of peace... equip you with every good thing to do his will, as he works in us what is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.”** Just as a good tour guide equips his followers with what they need for the trip, so also Jesus equips us with everything good for doing his will. The word translated as **“equip”** comes from a fisherman's world and described the process of mending torn nets to prepare them for use in fishing. When our Good Shepherd equips us with everything good for doing his will, he's talking about mending the holes that sin has torn in our lives – and when those holes are mended, God works through us in the world and uses us to gather more people to himself.

As our guide in life, Jesus packs just the right set of tools to repair that sin-damage. He shows us his promise of sins forgiven in the waters of baptism. He invites us to dine at his table in Holy Communion and receive again his forgiveness and love. And, he speaks to us in his Word in so many different ways. When we are buried in guilt and our own shortcomings, Jesus reminds us, **“I am the door...I came that [you] may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:9-10)**. When the evil around us seems overwhelming, we can remember in God's promises: **“No one can snatch [my sheep] out of my hand!”** When it seems like everything we love has been taken away, Jesus reminds us in Psalm 23: **“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”**

I bet if I gave you a minute or two you could come up with quite a few more of God's great promises to be with us and to give us the spiritual strength that we need to finish the journey. The point is this: Our Good Shepherd doesn't invite people to follow him because we are such gifted people and so well equipped to handle the challenges of life. The Good Shepherd calls poor, weak sinners like you and me to follow him; he forgives our sins, unlocks the gate to his kingdom, and equips us with what we need to serve him in life until then. He has created each one of us with the exact mix of talents and abilities needed to accomplish what he plans to lead us into, and his promises are the powerful message we can believe and share. Jesus equips us for life today.

And he doesn't ever stop doing that. Even in the midst of a sinful world, you can see Jesus at work. He is the one who worked in your heart the desire to worship him today, and he is the one who will make you grow by being reminded again of his promise of forgiveness. Your Good Shepherd equips you to grow in your faith when you spend time in personal and family devotions. Your Good Shepherd equips you to put your faith into action when you set aside part of your income or some of your time for his work. And it's not just the formal, more public kind of service to God's people through church. Your Good Shepherd equips you so that your whole life is a living testimony to your Savior, a visible message to those who watch, even when it's something as ordinary as doing your best in school, taking care of your family, or even just demonstrating to others contentment with the situation in life God has placed you in. Your Good Shepherd equips you for life today.

And so we can pray with the writer to the Hebrews that we and those around us follow our Good Shepherd. Whether it's life today, or life in eternity, there's no substitute for Jesus. He leads us to eternal life, and along the way he equips us for life today. Follow our Good Shepherd – now and always. Amen.