



GRACE CHURCH

The Shepherd Lives

Hebrews 13:20-25

Grace Church | 4.9.23

There is one particular story in the gospel of Mark that you may know—where Jesus feeds the five thousand families that had come to hear his teach. What you may be less familiar with is the context. Jesus has just gotten done sending out his disciples two by two for ministry and evangelism. They get back, and they are all tired—the text says they haven’t really had time to even eat, since people are crowding around Jesus constantly. They get on a boat to go away to a “desolate” place, but there is a problem. Everyone sees them going, and they *run* on foot to beat Jesus and his disciples to the place they were meant to get away and rest. So Jesus, weary in his humanity and leading a group of weary disciples, looks at all these weary people, a great crowd, and you’d think it would be reasonable to send them away, to plead for some privacy. Instead, the text says he had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. So instead of sending them away, he feeds them.

It’s a lovely little insult to be called a sheep, because sheep are not intelligent, and they are very needy. When your dog runs away from home, it can usually find its way back. When your cat gets stranded without you, it can hunt and scavenge. But when a domestic sheep loses its shepherd, they scatter. There is no fight or flight in sheep—just flight. Some have been known to follow each other off cliffs. They are easy prey for predators. Without shepherds, sheep are as good as dead.

In Ezekiel 34:23, God makes this promise: “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” Today we finish the book of Hebrews with that great truth in mind. In this book, Jesus has been many things for us: prophet, priest, king, sacrifice, leader, word, example, forerunner, captain. But here in **verse 20**, he is the great shepherd of the sheep.

But I wonder if today, on this Resurrection Sunday, you worry that the celebration and joy of this special day is for someone else. Maybe you feel, as I have felt even this week at times, that Jesus is a little worn down. He had to endure quite a lot at the cross, after all. He needs some privacy. You are a little too needy, you have a little too much suffering. But the heart of Jesus is full of compassion. He is not a CEO who needs his employees to stop bothering him because he is busy, he is not an exasperated parent who needs some alone time. The heart of Jesus is a shepherd. In other words—he lives in order to care for his sheep.



So what does that have to do with Resurrection Sunday? Because the difference between this shepherd Jesus and all other shepherds: this one was raised from the dead, **verse 20**.

Kids, when you were learning to read and write, which punctuation mark was more fun: a question mark or an exclamation mark? Which one feels more final? The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the exclamation point of all human history. Because we live on the other side of the first Good Friday, we often say that the cross is the high point of History. But in fact, without the resurrection the cross remains a question mark. All who trusted Jesus left Calvary with the question "has God been defeated?". The empty tomb of Jesus Christ is the exclamatory negative answer.

I like to keep it simple on Resurrection Sunday. You will leave this morning with three exclamation points from Hebrews 13:20-25: an **exclamatory truth**, an **exclamatory result**, and an **exclamatory response**.

Exclamatory Truth: The Shepherd Is Alive!

The great temptation of the audience of Hebrews, likely a small house church, maybe in Rome, was to abandon Jesus and go back to living in the Jewish rituals and laws that they came from. This way, their worship would be accepted by the Roman government, their life would be easier, and maybe they could throw a little Jesus in there too.

If you look in **verse 22**, you'll find the final appeal of this book. Exhortation is a word the author uses a few times—it means "help" or "comfort"—and it's the point of the book. Hebrews is a sermon, meant to help, instruct, comfort. It's the kind of word that would describe shepherds, those who exhort the sheep to stay close, not to stray. Hebrews is all about endurance in following Jesus—because he is the final word of reality. He isn't another prophet or religious leader. Ignoring Jesus is like ignoring gravity. So when he comes and says: I am the final word of God, the final sacrifice—you can't accept Jesus-lite. You can't take a little bit of Jesus. So the exhortation for us in Hebrews has always been, since the beginning, that Jesus the Son of God is the end to all our questioning, then we should not be afraid to go all in on him.. Remember, this is not the kind of God you invite into your life to be your assistant.

But none of this matters if Jesus is dead. All of it is a completely moot point. If Jesus is dead, like Mohammed is dead and Joseph Smith is dead and Buddha is dead—then he can't possibly be the final word. If Jesus is dead, then death defeated God, and death is the final word. What exhortation would there be to continue to follow him, if he was buried in the grave? The Christian faith stands and falls on the necessity of the resurrection.

We've actually already seen this in Hebrews. Jesus was the one who "cried out to God" in **5:7** and was delivered from death. What sets him apart from all the other priest is that he is a priest forever because of his "indestructible life" in **7:16**. The logic is like this: the consequence for sin against God is death—it's the natural result of turning from God who is life. But Jesus never sinned, and so he is the only human being in history to not deserve death. And yet, he went to



death—as Hebrews 2:14 told us, that by death he might destroy death. The only truly innocent died, but since God is just, it would not be right for him to stay there. So God raised him, for his perfect life is indestructible, and unable to be given over to death forever.

I want you, however, to notice the interesting language in **verse 20**. It doesn't say Jesus “rose” from the dead, but rather he was “brought again” from the dead. That word there “brought out” is literally “to be led out”, the same kind of word the New Testament uses when describing what happened to the Israelites who were “brought out” from Egypt. The link between the feast of the Passover and the Feast of the Resurrection is quite clear. Just as the Israelites were brought out of Egypt by the blood of the Old Covenant, the protection of the Passover Lamb, so Jesus is brought out of death by what, **verse 20**? The blood of the New Covenant. The right blood has always had the power in God's economy to save from death—to rescue, to resurrect.

What this does for us is link the resurrection of Jesus explicitly to the cross of Jesus. You cannot have one without the other. In the Old Testament, God's people were saved and brought out of Egypt as God, their shepherd, led them out by the power of the blood of a passover lamb. But in the New Covenant, remember when Jesus and his disciples go to celebrate passover, just a day before his death? There is wine, there is bread—but where is the lamb? Jesus is the lamb. As Tim Keller says: “Jesus is the only shepherd who became a sheep.”

This week I learned that while 72% of Americans believe in Heaven, only 58% of them believe in hell.¹ That 14 point gap is the space where we believe in the resurrection without the cross. That everything everywhere for everyone is going to be alright, that the world is not all that bad, that people are generally good, and that every religion is just one way of encouraging each other to do good things and enjoy our life a bit more. But you can't have resurrection without the cross. You can't have heaven without hell. The world we live in doesn't work that way. You can't have birth without pain. You can't explain away the reality of blood and death in the world—they are the great equalizers of humanity.

And what about the pain that is impossible to describe? In the Russian novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is a famous scene where one of the brothers, Ivan, is giving his defense of his agnosticism. He has thought through it all, and is more than alright with the idea that some people suffer for the price of their wrongs. But what causes him to lose his faith is the suffering of children, of abuse or murder of innocents, the pain of the most innocent and seemingly close to God. How can such suffering be explained? How can such wrongs ever be paid for or forgiven? And the answer of the brother of faith, Alyosha, is correct. He points to the payment of Christ, in his words “the one who can forgive everything and all, because he gave his innocent blood for all and everything.”

To be a Christian is to accept that the harsh realities of a world plunged in sin require the harsh reality of the death of God. Jesus went into death, back to Egypt. The shepherd became a sheep—a

¹ Taken from a beautiful Easter essay by Samuel James



sacrifice—the only one completely undeserving of death physically went down into it. As the blood of the firstborn lamb on the door delivers the Israelites' firstborn sons from death, so the blood of the firstborn of God delivers us. Jesus died so that he could both judge the great injustices of sin and forgive all those who come to him by faith. He paid for it all—all suffering, all death, blood for blood.

But friends, he lives. The lamb of God died so that none of his lambs would have to, but could instead join him in eternal life. He is the great shepherd—and he is not dead. He doesn't grow weary of you, he lives forever to feed you, protect you, and lead you. Death is dead, sin is powerless over you, Satan has no hold on you. The wolves are gone, their defeat was confirmed on Good Friday, and there is no resurrection for them. The shepherd is alive. If you cannot come to him by faith, this living shepherd, then you must answer the question of death somehow. But today, God brought you here to hear again: your searching can end. You can come to your shepherd, throwing off sin, believing in him, and coming into his family of faith. All of this is possible, because the shepherd is alive now and calling all of us to follow him.

Exclamatory Result: You can Please God!

The benediction of Hebrews is not just a declaration of truth, but it's a prayer. The prayer of the author for their audience is that the great God of peace, that is, the God who gives and makes peace through Jesus' blood, would accomplish something. If the resurrection is such a big deal, what does it bring about? So It's a prayer for *equipping*, **verse 21**, which is an interesting way to put it.

Equipping is not an end in and of itself. The whole point of *being equipped* is that you would be prepared to do something. Equipping isn't an end, it's giving you the right equipment, the tools for the job at hand. And the job at hand in **verse 21** is the "doing will of God", which can be summed up in the text as doing "what is pleasing in God's sight". It's what **13:16** said last week: "to do good and share what you have".

God's will is that God would be pleased. Now you might think this sounds selfish—but you forget that if what Christians say about God is true, that God is the highest good and beauty in the universe, the standard and source of everything that is pleasing and delightful, then God's desire for his own glory is actually your highest good too. What could be better than pleasing God? What could be better than causing the highest good in the world to say "well done"? Imagine the joy you get from hearing that from your earthly Father, from a coach or a leader or a teacher or a friend or a boss? Now imagine hearing it from the one who created everything, the Father of all? God doesn't need your goodness in order to be happy any more than the sun needs you to keep shining, but like a good Father, even when his children bring him subpar pieces of art—he smiles. He hangs it on his fridge. And don't lie—that is what you were created to do: to please God and do his will.

So maybe you say: "ok, I can buy that. Let me get to work this week to do good, share what I have,



do God's will, and please him". But wait, you've forgotten the *how*. God must equip you with the right tools to please him, tools that come through the resurrection.

Anyone have glasses? Have you ever needed to tighten them up a little bit, but you didn't have the tiny little screwdriver? Without the right tools for the job you'll just make a big mess of it. So the point of **verse 21** is that God can and will equip you to do his will and please him. And the list of the tools is really simple: it's everything good. What does God give you in order to please him? Everything good. Because Jesus is raised, you have **God's word**, the witness of the apostles. Because Jesus is raised, you have the **Holy Spirit**. And because Jesus is raised, you have **the church**. But it doesn't stop there: You have *everything* you need to follow Jesus until the end. God does not withhold good things from his children. It may involve some discipline, it may not come like you expected it, or on your timing, but God is divinely generous with his goodness.

The greatest part is now you have the ultimate good: Jesus himself. All of this goodness is *through* Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul talks about this as a kind of reenactment of the death and resurrection of Jesus, like a "J-Curve".² If we have died with him, he says—that is, we have let go of our old life and our self-rule and followed Jesus to the death of self—then we will necessarily, guaranteed, *rise* with him. None who give themselves over to Jesus fail to get up out of the grave with Jesus. And what this does is bring with it the greatest gift of goodness that God could ever give, the greatest tool to please him: Jesus. What does this mean?

The great shepherd is alive, and not only does he protect us in the valley of the shadow of death by defeating death for us, he leads us to green pastures, and to a banquet where we sit with him and enjoy his presence and pleasure forever. There is now not an iota of goodness in your life that cannot be used to please God. You can eat dinner like you have died with Jesus and are risen with Jesus, when you enjoy provision and taste and company as if God himself is there. You can love your kids like you have died with Jesus and risen with Jesus when you love them as you have been loved and accepted by God. You can go to class like you have died and risen with Jesus when you understand the great good of learning is so that you can marvel at God in all disciplines and paths, you can go to that job that isn't so fulfilling like you have died and risen with Jesus when you know that God sees your work, and you can ever face pain and hardship and annoyances and tears like you have died and risen with Jesus when you use every opportunity of weakness and personal death as a chance to understand and grow intimate with Christ who understands your position.

On and on I could go, but let me just say this. The great result of the death and resurrection of Jesus is that you can please God.

Exclamatory Response: Praise Him Forever and Ever, Amen!

Now time for some application. All you practical people are always asking: tell me what to do! And look, the text gives us an answer in **verse 21**. Amen is the agreement of the people to the praise of

² Paul Miller, *J Curve*.



God. It means “so be it” or “let it be”. It’s the communal response of a prayer like our text, and it’s usually situated after an expression of God’s greatness. The appropriate response to the cross and resurrection of Jesus and the result is to worship. It’s to bow before God and say, sing, or pray: you get the glory forever and ever, Amen.

Maybe you say: “how is that something to do? How is worship practical in my life? What does worship change anything?” I would humbly submit to you that worship is the greatest action of your life, that it can encompass everything you do, and that it can change everything. Imagine how different the world would be if everyone living on it bowed before Jesus and gave him the glory he deserves forever. Imagine if every human heart was continually echoing the “amen” of God’s glory? That world would be far more heaven than earth.

The gospel accounts are all concerned with Jesus’ identity. When Jesus asks his disciples: “who do you say I am”, Peter responds “the Christ, the Son of the living God”, and Jesus says that profession is a *heavenly one*. It’s what the angels in heaven are saying. At the cross, the centurion saw Jesus die and said “surely this is the Son of God”? And isn’t it no wonder then that in **verse 20** he is identified as “Lord” Jesus? When you praise God, when your heart soars to give him glory, no matter how small and insignificant you feel, you are welcoming in the realities of Heaven. You are administering reality³. Every truly great or good action or deed taken for God begins and ends with the praise of his glory.

Do you struggle to know where to start your praise? Friends, today is resurrection Sunday. How many of you have ever heard of another man rising up from the dead and never dying again—a historical, verified and witnessed reality? You can start your praise there. Jesus is worthy of forever praise and amen because he is the forever shepherd, the eternal one who deserves glory forever.

When all is said and done and the earth is no more, Revelation 7:16-17 says that Jesus will still be our Shepherd. “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” He is alive, he lives to care for his sheep, he lives forever, and he is living now to guide you who trust him, step by step, to the place where he will wipe every tear from your eye.

³ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*



