

Text: 20. May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, 21. equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (NIV 1984)

This passage from the Apostle to the Hebrews is the benediction the pastor often uses at gravesides after the funeral of a Christian. The whole letter or actually sermon to the Hebrews has proclaimed the theme of the **superiority of Christ above everyone and everything**. In these two verses, so very near the end of the book, our Savior is described as “**the Great Shepherd of the sheep**.” He deserves that title above everyone else; above all others. He is the one who worked out our salvation, and who prepared us for lives of service.

I. The servant who worked out our salvation. (13:20)

Who is this God who is our Great Shepherd? The apostle calls him “*the God of Peace*.” Paul liked to use this title for God, especially in his longer letters, and our author uses it here, too. “*God of peace*” means the God characterized by peace. Peace is what he gives; peace is one of his great blessings, and peace is part of his plan for us. The Hebrews—Jews who were now Christians—needed to hear about the peace that comes from God and the peace that characterizes God because there was strife in their group; and between them and other Christians. The Jews of the first century who became Christians had a tendency to think that the path of Christ meant a path through his Jewish roots; they often felt that to become a true Christian you had to become a Jew first, as if Judaism were the foyer or narthex of Christianity. But Christ threw open the side doors and opened the windows and tore off the roof and broke down all the walls, too. The path to heaven is the pathway of Jesus Christ, and no other label—not circumcision, not certain spiritual gifts, not even a certain translation of the Bible—is a mark of who is saved and who is not. We put our faith in Christ and we are shepherded by the God of peace.

The apostle continues: “*who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus*.” What is “*the eternal covenant*”? As I mentioned earlier, the theme of this book of Hebrews is the superiority of Jesus Christ. One of the most important ways Jesus is superior is his superiority to the priesthood of the Old Testament.

Although there are groups today dedicated to the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem , we are told that this would serve no purpose at all. There is no need to resume the Old Testament sacrifices and rituals because of what our author describes here: “*the blood of the eternal covenant.*” The blood of Jesus has been shed, once for all time, once for all mankind. Jesus lived in our place and died in our stead to complete the requirements of God on our behalf.

Today he leads us and he guides us and he protects us – and that’s why it’s so easy to see him as our author proclaims him here: “*that great Shepherd of the sheep.*”

Our Shepherd knows each one of us by name. First of all, he has given us his name, and we are proud to be called “Christians.” He has placed his name on us just as he has placed everything he did for us on our account. We aren’t just branded or tattooed, we are claimed by him as his own. But when we say that he knows us by name, we don’t just mean that because we have his brand name that that’s all he cares about. He also cares about you because you’re you and because you’re his, as well. When you pray asking for his help, he already knows why you’re praying and what you’re asking for. He knows because he is the Great Shepherd; he knows you and he loves you.

Our Shepherd leads us where we need to be – even though we don’t know the way. Just how lost can a sheep get? Just how far stuck in our sins do we get? We can’t make it out; we can’t survive. We can’t escape—and yet our Great Shepherd is one who left the 99 to come looking for the one. And you were the one. He found you, he rescued you, and he brought you home again.

Our Shepherd protects us from danger. How many unseen spiritual dangers are all around you, all the time? Another blessing from our Great Shepherd is that we don’t even know. The clutches of the devil come so close to our throats, but our Shepherd is there to protect us, day and night, morning and evening, our whole lives.

But all of these things, as wonderful as they are, are not all our Shepherd does for us. In the second verse of our text, we learn something else about him, and about ourselves.

He is... **II. The one who equips us to work in his service. (13:21)**

That means that you and I have work to do, in his service. We aren’t just passengers on our way to heaven; we’re part of his crew. There is work to be done. When we think we can sit back and be a stay-at-home Christian and never get involved in the work of the Gospel, never find out anything about the Bible, never get into a difficult conversation with someone who doesn’t want to hear about the Lord, then we are still like wandering sheep.

But our Good Shepherd has saved us from the sleepy life of a sheep to be workers in his kingdom. You might work as a student of the gospel, learning and growing in your faith. You might work as someone who looks after our little ones, teaching them the basics of life and looking after their safety. You might be one who sets an example by the way you live, or you might be one who loves covering all the details, or maybe you're more of a big picture kind of sheep in the kingdom, keeping the rest of us on course with your guidance and insight.

What kind of work in the kingdom do you have to do? It's not optional, but through God's forgiveness and training, we will be able to go about his work together to accomplish his will.

He gives us what is good to him. "***In everything good,***" he says. That is, in the sphere of anything and everything that fits under God's holy and timeless judgment of "***good***" (Genesis 1:10. etc.). The difference between the kalon (Greek for "good") (tob in Hebrew) of Genesis 1:10 and the agatho (Greek) here is that this word means "***useful,***" and the prayer here is that God would make each one of us useful for his kingdom. This is a prayer for the tools of sanctification. That is to say, God does not give us the tools to save ourselves or be justified (Jesus did that for us), but God gives us what is necessary for serving him and responding to what Christ has done.

The apostle adds this to what he has said so far: may he work in us what is pleasing to him. If you have been nervous about working in God's kingdom, about being a part of his family and a part of his plan for the world, be at peace. The God of Peace gives you what you need, to do what he needs you to do.

I'm going to say that again, because it's important that we understand what God is saying to us: God gives you – what you need – to do what he wants you to do. The Lord lets us serve him as we think we should, but there are times when he changes the course we set for one that suits him better. So even though we thought we should be doing something over there, the Lord actually wanted us working for him over here; and maybe he wants us to be doing something very different from the work we thought we were perfectly trained for.

We are the object of his work, and Jesus Christ is the carpenter, hammering, shaving, planning and fitting us into place. He glues up our joints and fastens together our parts so that we are tools fit for service in the kingdom of God. In our sanctified, forgiven lives, we work for our Great Shepherd.

God has made us his own, and that's why we praise him with our lives. He's the Shepherd who puts us to work, who rescues us from danger and who rescues us even from ourselves, and so we glorify him forever and ever. Amen.