

TOMMY HAD HIS BAG ALL SET. He had a granola bar, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a bottle of Mountain Dew, all the food he would need for a while. He had a shirt, some shorts, and a blanket. It was all he needed. For Tommy was running away from home. He had it all figured out He would wash cars and collect cans for money. It wouldn't be easy, but the most important thing is that he would be getting away from those big, mean, rotten parents who never let him do what he wanted. He was going to be free!

Why do people run away? Maybe you tried running away from home as a kid. More recently, you might do a different kind of running away, avoiding tough situations, sneaking out when there's going to be a confrontation. Why do people run? It's to avoid trouble. It's to avoid pain. It's to seek out something better out there than what you're experiencing now. There must be something better, and to be honest, you want to be around to see it. You run for self-preservation. To run to survive.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was facing trouble and pain. He was facing the worst experience you could possibly imagine. His life would be threatened, but He wouldn't sneak out or avoid it. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, wouldn't run away. He loves the sheep. And for the sheep, He lays down His life. And for the sheep, He takes His life back up again.

As we see the kind of care that Jesus brings to the people, we remember that God has, at times, dealt directly with people in the past. He rescued them from Egypt by the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. He led the people in the wilderness for 40 years. But that was a long time ago. More often, and even, to an extent during those times, He cares for His people through servants. Moses governed the people, followed by Joshua. Judges led the people, and then kings. But in addition to that, God had spiritual leaders as well. Sure there was Moses, but his brother Aaron was anointed as the priest. There were the Levites who took care of tabernacle and temple worship. Some of the Judges were spiritual leaders like Samuel, but I don't think you would have wanted a guy like Samson to be your pastor. Kings led spiritually to a certain extent, but more so the priests. These spiritual leaders were what we might call shepherds who answer to the great, Good Shepherd.

Some of those shepherds did not do so well. They made themselves fat while the sheep went starving, whether that was literally or spiritually. They cared for themselves, but they did not care for the sheep. They were in it for their own power, their own glory, their own wealth. These were things that you can't enjoy while you're dead, so when danger came, they turned tail and ran.

It was happening again. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were seen as spiritual leaders, but they were leading the people into darkness. There was no compassion for the people. There was no forgiveness. They were constantly putting others down if it meant raising themselves. They were fooling themselves into believing that they had won the love of God, and were creating unrealistic expectations of all other people.

And it still happens today. There are many pastors, deacons, priests, or elders who seek to care for God's sheep. The lessons for today from Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5 talk about being shepherds of God's flock. None are perfect. No one hopes to be a bad pastor. You will need to make sure that he shares the voice of the Good Shepherd with you – nothing more, and nothing less.

But Jesus is the Good Shepherd. What makes Him as a Shepherd so good? He states two things. First, He says, **“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”** A dozen years ago, my wife and I went to Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons. After hiking Jenny Lake at the Grand Tetons, we made our sandwiches and went to sit down at a picnic bench in the trees near the beach. Just as I was about to sit down, I looked up and yelled at my wife, “Drop the sandwich, let's go!” It was a bear. What kind? I don't know. The big kind. I didn't stand there to ponder him going, “Hmmm... that looks like an *Ursus arctos horribillis*, more commonly known as the grizzly.” No. It was a bear, and that meant it was time to leave our food and run away. As we went along, people were going toward the picnic area, we said, “Turn around, it's a bear!” One guy actually said, “Really? Cool!” and ran toward the picnic area. I didn't care. That's one more thing between me and the bear.

I didn't care much about losing that sandwich. But I'm ashamed to say that I didn't care too much about that guy who ran toward the bear. I didn't know him. I could have tried harder to get him to see the danger, but I didn't. I was scared for my own life.

But the second mark of a Good Shepherd, according to Jesus is this. **“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”** Jesus knows you. So He stays and lays down His life for you.

What does that look like? What danger is there, really? It comes from the devil. After he rebelled against God, he learned that he couldn't overthrow the Lord from heaven. So does he do? He attacks what God loves. This wolf came in the form of a snake. And by tricking our first parents, he brought a curse and doom on us all. But now he had a once in a lifetime opportunity. The God he could not conquer, the Lord he could not slay has chosen to take on mortal flesh in an attempt to redeem His people. It was a chance to sink his fangs into the Shepherd. If He can get the Shepherd, he could then seal the deal for the sheep and have us. So what did Jesus face? Trouble, pain, hell. He faced the worst experience you could possibly imagine. But He wouldn't run away. That's what makes the Shepherd good.

WE ARE AMAZED BY HIS LOVE. Now let us be amazed by his power. Better yet, let us be amazed by His *authority* and power. For He says something just a bit strange. He says, **“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.”**

I’m amazed enough to admit that He has the power to give up His life in the first place. None of us can will our souls to go away. Jesus not only did this, but He had the right to. God has said to us, “You shall not murder.” He declares He is the God who puts to death and who brings to life. We don’t have the right to end the life of another, for we didn’t give life to that person. So also we don’t have the right to end our own lives. God gave us life. It’s His right. We don’t have the right, but we may think we have the power. So people plan to end their life in this way or that. But even that doesn’t always work.

But Jesus had the right. No one takes His life from Him. Earlier, men wanted to kill Jesus. He slipped through them untouched and unharmed. On that Friday, the only way that they could crucify Him is because He let them. But even then, they could not take His life. Even then, not even the pain, the punishment, or the torment did Him in. He gave up His spirit. He chose to stop living.

So, too, He has the authority to take up His life again. Now here is a mystery that I’ll never be able to fully understand. He’s dead. He’s truly dead. How could He make Himself alive. Yet Scripture speaks of it both ways. God made Him alive and He came to life by His own power. I cannot explain it. When I am dead, I can do nothing. But when Jesus Christ is dead, He can come back to life. Not only does He have the power to do so, He has the right, the authority to do so. God, the giver of life, and give it up and take it back. And that does not diminish the reality of His death in any way. It does not take away the impact of His death and sacrifice. It does not nullify the Gospel joy that comes from the Lamb of God’s blood poured out for me. But what’s truly great is that if He has the right and authority to take up His *own* life again... He has the power and the authority to give you back yours. Not only that, He also tells us that He has the desire to do so. He *wants* to do this for you, to rescue you from your own death. To do that, He could not leave you to that wolf, the devil. To do that, He had to conquer death, to go through death. He laid down His life. He took it up again. He’ll do the same for you.

He’s not going to run away with His work incomplete. Nor does He want us to run away from Him. This Shepherd would not run away from the hardest part. Would He run away from you now, dear little lamb of Jesus? Listen to His voice. Trust in His power. Listen to the shepherds He places over you, who echo His voice. See that this Shepherd is good.

Amen.

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Amen.

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