

Introduction

From children's books to impressive galleries, Christian art has often depicted the scene of Jesus as our Good Shepherd and Christians as his sheep. The background is picturesque and peaceful; the shepherd strong and secure; the sheep cute and cuddly. But what about sheep led to the slaughter? This scene is far different. The wolves and lions are hiding behind the green foliage to pounce on them. The thieves and robbers are lurching out of nowhere to scatter them. The enemies and opponents are waiting to harm them. This kind of picture may not be depicted very often, but it's a much more accurate picture of the Christian life in this sinful world. Being sheep is not all sunshine and roses. In ancient Israel, you could look out from Jerusalem to see this wilderness stretching out before you, filled with spotty pasture, hazardous paths, and dangerous enemies. In ancient Rome, this scene depicted the lives of the people Peter is writing to, Christian slaves. Now ancient Roman slavery was *not* the same as American race-based slavery before the Civil War, but it was hardly sunshine and roses. These slaves belonged to their masters. These masters were not Christians. These non-Christian masters were, at times, harsh and abusive. To top it all off, these non-Christian masters were, at times, harsh and abusive when these slaves had done nothing wrong but were suffering *simply* because they were Christian! So what do you do when you feel like slaughtered sheep? That's what the Second Reading is all about. It's a moving part of the Bible that will impact your beliefs *and* your emotions *and* your actions. Today we will dive right into the most difficult aspects of our lives, where Peter encourages you to:

Be Like Your Slaughtered Shepherd

He commends you for it ... He calls you to it ... He covers you from it

He Commends You For It

In his letter Peter is talking to Christian slaves who were suffering unjustly. Why would these innocent sheep be like their slaughtered Shepherd? Here's the first reason. ***For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.*** The first reason is that Christ commends them for it. Here is a basic observation from life: some people suffer for the wrong things they have done; other people suffer for the good things they have done. When people suffer for the wrong things they have done, there is no commendation in that. A professor is not going to give you extra credit points for plagiarizing. A police officer is not going to give you a pat on the back for blowing through a stop sign. A friend is not going to give you a hug for gossiping behind her back. No, in all those cases, you're going to get an F, you're going to get a ticket, you're going to lose a friendship—and rightfully so! But when people suffer for the good things they have done, there is commendation in that. A professor is not going to congratulate you for bringing up a religious point in class. A motorist is not going to be patient with you when you follow the speed limit. A friend is not going to thank you for speaking a tough message of love no one else wants to hear. No, in all those cases, you're going to get dismissed as naïve, you're going to have someone tailgate you and honk at you, you're going to have a friend who gets mad and defensive. But God still commends you for

it. Now we need to understand the word “commend” properly. It does not mean that God offers salvation to those who merit it. Here we are not talking about justification, or how we are declared right with God. It does mean that God gives his approval and appreciation—a pat on the back and an encouraging word, so to speak. Here we are talking about sanctification, or how we live our lives as people who already have been justified before God. So be like your slaughtered Shepherd, because he commends you for it.

Still today, it’s easy to feel like slaughtered sheep. Yes, we know that sometimes we do wrong things and suffer the consequences—rightly so. But many other times we suffer wrongly so—simply for doing good as Christians. What do you do when you feel like slaughtered sheep? Remember that Christ commends you for it. For the children here, Christ commends you for simply walking away from the class bully who wants to rile you up and make fun of you and fight with you. For the university students here, Christ commends you for the humility to say you are wrong in a cut-throat academic environment that just wants to prove how much smarter you are than everyone else. For the young professionals here, Christ commends you for standing on biblical sexuality when all your friends are telling you to do whatever you want with your own body. For the families here, Christ commends you for telling your sports teams, robotics clubs, and music groups that no, you will not give them a blank check for your evenings and weekends but will make time for church, catechism, and Sunday school. For the retirees here, Christ commends you for including the church in your will, even though you know your children will be a little upset they won’t get more money from your inheritance. Because Christ does that for you, wouldn’t you do this all the more? So be more and more like your slaughtered Shepherd.

He Calls You to It

In his letter Peter is talking to Christian slaves who were suffering unjustly. Why would these innocent sheep be like their slaughtered Shepherd? Here’s the second reason. For *to this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps*. The second reason is that Christ calls them to it. When these slaves were brought to faith in Jesus, they were not called to live an easy life. They were called to follow the path Christ went down in his passion. Their Savior Jesus was himself an innocent sheep led to the slaughter. In these verses, Peter quotes and alludes to Isaiah 53, especially the verse, *He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth*. Let’s go back to the passion history we heard a few weeks ago. He stood on trial as the Sanhedrin were spewing lies and twisting words and launching insults, yet what did he do? He did not retaliate, but he stood there silently. He took the punches to his face and the floggings to his back, yet what did he do? He did not make threats but let them do it over and over again. He heard the crowds chant, “Crucify him!” and saw a vacillating Pilate wash his hands of his responsibility, yet what did he do? He did not protest an unjust judicial system, but he entrusted the whole situation to the ultimate divine Judge. He never committed a sin in his entire life but bore all the sins of the entire world in his body, yet what did he do? He did not want anyone to die in their sin, but he stretched out his hands to die in the place of sinners. He endured all the wounds the Roman soldiers could muster, yet what did he do? He did not call for sympathy for his plight, but he healed you with his wounds. What did Christ do to deserve all that suffering? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Christ knows exactly what it is like to suffer unjustly for something you did not deserve. To be clear, Christ is first and foremost your Savior, who did what you could not when he died in your place to take away all your sins. You can never be like him in taking away your sins, nor do you ever need to be, because he has already done that for you. But

that does not negate that Christ is also your example. He does call you to follow him on a path of suffering, and he inspires you to do what he did. So be like your slaughtered Shepherd, because he calls you to it.

Still today, it's easy to feel like slaughtered sheep. Yes, we all want a nice, easy life, where God paves this smooth four-lane highway with no traffic and no problems straight to heaven. But this is not the Christian life! This was not the path for Christ. Christ suffered all the unjust beatings during his passion to perfectly fulfill God's law for all the times we have resented or avoided or complained about our suffering. Christ took up our guilt on the cross, where our sins died away and where our righteous lives spring to life. Here's the key: sheep are not on a different path than their Shepherd. You are united to your Savior Jesus, which means you will suffer unjustly too. What do you do when you feel like slaughtered sheep? Remember that Christ calls you to it. For the children here, Christ calls you to simply walking away from the class bully who wants to rile you up and make fun of you and fight with you. For the university students here, Christ calls you to humbly admit your faults in a cut-throat academic environment that just wants to prove how much smarter you are than everyone else. For the young professionals here, Christ calls you to embrace biblical sexuality when all your friends are telling you to do whatever you want with your own body. For the families here, Christ calls you to carve out time in your evenings and on your weekends for church, catechism, and Sunday school. For the retirees here, Christ calls you to generously support his church financially at a time when people are concerned about how big a retirement account they can have or how big an inheritance they can pass to their children. Because Christ does that for you, wouldn't you do this all the more? So be more and more like your slaughtered Shepherd.

He Covers You from It

In his letter Peter is talking to Christian slaves who were suffering unjustly. Why would these innocent sheep be like their slaughtered Shepherd? Here's the third reason. *For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.* The third reason is that Christ covers them from it. Peter looks back to when these Christian slaves did not know Christ. Before they knew Christ as their Savior, they were wandering around like aimless sheep. But after they came to know Christ through the power of God's Word, they came under the care of their Good Shepherd. They knew from experience that the Christian life is about sheep following their Good Shepherd along a path of unjust suffering. But even more than that, they needed to be reminded that the Christian life is about their Good Shepherd leading and guiding them, nourishing and feeding them, calling and caring for them. This Shepherd and Overseer of their souls would act like this giant cover out in front of them, who shields his sheep from the savage attacks of the wolves and the insidious attacks of the enemy. Following the Shepherd to the slaughterhouse is not for the faint of heart, but the sheep can rest easy in his care. So be like your slaughtered Shepherd, because he covers you from it.

Still today, it's easy to feel like slaughtered sheep. Yes, I know this sermon has challenged you and it has not been an easy message to hear. But we cannot end this sermon without going back to the beginning. Even more important than you following your Shepherd is your Shepherd leading you. Your slaughtered Shepherd has been through the slaughterhouse before, and he knows what you're facing as you follow behind him. He is the one who goes out in front to cover you with his protection and peace, his grace and goodness, his care and concern. What do you do when you feel like slaughtered sheep? Remember that Christ covers you from it. For the children here, Christ does not promise that you will never face a class bully, but he does

promise that he will cover you with his angelic protection. For the university students here, Christ does not promise that you will never face someone who flaunts their knowledge, but he does promise that he has already covered you with the knowledge that makes you wise for salvation. For the young professionals here, Christ does not promise that our secular world will operate according to biblical morality, but he does promise to cover the church with stunning radiance as his bride. For the families here, Christ does not promise that your schedule will be anything less than chaotic, but he does promise that he will cover your stressed-out minds with rest when you hear his Word. For the retirees here, Christ does not promise that the end of your life will be your golden years, but he does promise that he will cover your fearful hearts with the peace of eternal life in heaven. Because Christ does that for you, wouldn't you do this all the more? So be more and more like your slaughtered Shepherd.

Conclusion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a twentieth-century Lutheran pastor in Germany. His father was a professor and his family aristocrats, so they weren't thrilled when he wanted to become a pastor. He eventually became a professor and traveled around Europe and to America. He opposed Hitler's rise to power and helped found the Confessing Church, which publicly stated that it would first follow Christ, not any human leader. He was known for his commitment to suffering and nonviolence. He wrote the meditation, "The Cost of Discipleship," which called Christians to reject the comfortable Christianity of his day and embrace discipleship that included a cross. And he practiced what he preached. He was banned from Berlin; he was forbidden to teach; his underground seminary was closed. When World War II broke out, he was teaching in America but felt compelled to return to Germany. His efforts at resistance and rescuing Jews were eventually uncovered, and he was transported to a concentration camp, where he died, only days before it was freed by the Allies. The doctor who witnessed his death was impressed by his final prayer and had never seen someone who died so submissive to the will of God.¹ Your life may not be as dramatic as that, but we all are inspired by stories like that. Above all, we are inspired by our own Good Shepherd, who was slaughtered too. He died on the cross to save all his undeserving sheep. His cross is where he empowers you to embrace suffering and nonviolence, no matter how hard it may be. As you leave that cross, be like your shepherd as you follow him. Amen.

¹ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 378–380.