

May 8, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

The Lord is Your (sg.) Shepherd!

All of God's Word is precious, but certain chapters seem to connect with our hearts especially well. Psalm 23 is one of those special sections. It is certainly the most famous of the 150 psalms in the Bible. It is regularly recited, or read, or sung at funerals, which is perfectly appropriate. But Psalm 23 is so rich in comfort that we would be cheating ourselves if we only focus on it at funerals. If you do not have it memorized, I'll encourage you to learn it so that it can be a constant comfort to you. As we meditate on this psalm this morning, the Holy Spirit will remind you that the Lord is your shepherd.

Sheep are not the brightest or bravest of animals. They need a shepherd to take care of them. If they find a nice clump of grass beneath a thick bush of thorns, they'll try to eat it, and they'll get stuck in the thorns, and their short stubby sheep legs will not be able to get them out. In storms, sheep have been known to run to a corner of the pasture, pile on top of one another and smother one another to death. Sheep can not roll over. If they get stuck on their back, they're going to stay stuck until someone rolls them back over or they die. Sheep are basically blind. They can not tell if the blob coming after them is another sheep or a fierce mountain lion until it's too late. They can not defend themselves. They do not have the teeth of a shark, the tail of a scorpion, or the strength of an ox. They're soft, defenseless, and weak. And because Jesus calls you his sheep, apparently, so are you.

Spiritually speaking, we are soft, defenseless and weak. We are so easily distracted. Some temptation will get our attention and before we even realize it, we are clicking on some website we should not, or saying something that hurts others, or doing something that we should not as we turn away from Jesus and get stuck in another sin. Sometimes we focus so much on what WE want that we end up trampling over others and hurting them. We can not see the future and so we worry and stress. We are no match for the devil and his evil demons who are doing all they can every day to pull you away from Jesus and into hell with them. Just like sheep need a shepherd, we need a spiritual shepherd. As King David reflected on that thought, the Holy Spirit guided him to write Psalm 23. Let's take a closer look.

Verse 1 – Notice that LORD is all capital letters. That's the special name for the God of the covenant, the God of free and faithful grace. It is the LORD (all capitals)

- who went searching for Adam & Eve to tell them that he was going to send a Savior who would crush the devil's head,

- who locked Noah and his family in the ark to keep them and the promise of the Savior alive,
- who promised that the Savior would be born from Abraham's family tree,
- who called to Moses from the burning bush to set his people free,
- who called King David to repentance so he could write Psalm 23. etc.

The Lord is – not was, or will be, or could be, or should be, or might be – is! No matter when or where you are, the Lord IS your shepherd. Notice, also, how David makes it very personal. He does not say, “a” shepherd, or “the” shepherd, or even “our shepherd.” He says “MY” shepherd – as if you were the only sheep that existed. He knows you personally. He knows how you feel, how you hurt, how you get scared, what your weaknesses are. He knows everything about you and he is giving you his full attention. He is your (sg.) shepherd.

Since the LORD IS YOUR shepherd, you have all that you need. You will not be in want. You will not lack anything. It does not matter if your health is failing, or if you are poor, or if you feel forgotten and lonely, or if it feels like your whole life is spinning down the sewer. If you have the Lord as your shepherd, you are going to be OK. He has promised to provide you with daily bread, to hear and answer your prayers, to work things for your eventual and eternal good, and on and on. Who cares what other people say or think or feel about you? Jesus says that you are worth dying for. Even before you were born, Jesus knew every sin that you were ever going to commit, and he still wanted you be his side so much that he was willing to die in order to take away all of your guilt and shame. His resurrection on Easter morning guarantees that you also will rise from the dead and live in heaven forever with a glorified body. What more could we hope for? Since Jesus took care of your salvation, then you can also trust him to take care of everything else.

Verse 2 – When the great good news of salvation touches your heart and you realize that, in Jesus, you have everything you need, you can be at peace. Sheep will only lie down if they are completely satisfied and safe, when they do not need to eat any more grass and are not worried at all. Also, sheep will only drink from a stream if the water is calm. If it is bubbling over rocks and making noise, the sheep will be scared and stay away. The Lord makes you lie down in green pastures and leads you beside quiet waters in the sense that he always takes care of everything you need. He – verse 3 – restores, or refreshes, your soul. He strengthens your faith so you trust him and stay calm and peaceful even as the world around you gets crazier and crazier and when things in your life do not go the way you want.

When a shepherd guides the sheep along a path, the sheep are likely to wander away just like our sinful natures keep trying to steer us away from Jesus and into sin and hell. A good shepherd will make sure that the sheep stay on the path just like Jesus will make sure that you stay on the path of righteousness. Through the

good news of God's love in Christ – which comes to you through simple Sunday sermons, or the encouragement of Christian friends and relatives, or the devotions you read or listen to throughout the week – Jesus will keep you on the path of righteousness. He will guide you to stay on the path outlined in the Ten Commandments so that the devil can not snatch you away. And why does Jesus do this for you? For his name's sake. When you were baptized – when God's name was placed on you – he promised to forgive all your sins and to always be with you until you see him face to face in heaven. If he abandoned you, if he did not take care of you and guide you to heaven, his name – his reputation – would be ruined. The Lord staked his reputation on saving you. You can be sure.

Verse 4 – Every moment of every day we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Any of us could die at any moment. Still, we do not live in fear. As we fasten our seatbelts to drive somewhere or lay our heads on our pillows to sleep, we do not worry about what might happen on our trip or during the night. For Jesus' sheep, death is only a shadow. Shadows can seem scary but they can not harm us. Death will not harm us either. When we breath our last breath and close our eyes in death here on earth, we then breath in the rarified air of heaven and open our eyes to see Jesus smiling at us and saying, "Welcome home! You made it!"

Through life and death, you do not fear any evil because Jesus, your Good Shepherd is with you. No English translation can bring out the full impact of what King David wrote here. First of all, this is the exact middle of the psalm. Everything that came before and everything after is pointing to this phrase, "for you are with me." Notice, again, the personal, individual nature of faith – "me." Jesus is with YOU, singular. A more literalistic translation would be, "for you yourself are standing right next to me." As Jesus stands next to you, he also protects you. Shepherds protect the sheep with a rod – think of a short baseball bat – that they use to hit a wolf or any animal that tries to attack the sheep. Shepherds also use their staffs to ward off any enemies and even to lift the sheep away from any danger. Each one of you has a personal body guard who is God himself. What a tremendous comfort that is.

But our Great Good Shepherd does more than just protect us. He also provides us with everything we need. Verse 5, "you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." We have now left behind the illustration of a shepherd and sheep. Sheep do not eat at a table or drink from a cup. Even though we have many spiritual enemies around us in this world – the devil and his demons, the warped immorality of our culture, the influence of unbelievers around us, etc. – they can not get to us. In the face of such spiritual enemies, the Lord prepares a table for you – the banquet of salvation. Think of it! The Ruler of the universe, your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ prepares the banquet of salvation for you and serves it to you as if he was a waiter serving you in a five-star restaurant. It does

not cost you a thing because Jesus paid for it with his life. He gives you a fancy plate with a large portion of love, a giant scoop of forgiveness, a generous serving of mercy with a helping of angel protection on the side, a casserole of comfort and compassion, and the sweet drink of peace and joy. It is all yours for free. No matter what your sin, no matter how embarrassing, no matter how shameful, no matter how secret, no matter how often, Jesus will not stop loving you.

Back in the Bible times, olive oil was very important. They used it to barter with – they would trade with a jar of oil as if it were money. They also used oil in their food, even more so than we do today. Having a lot of oil meant that you were rich. Obviously, since there were no cars with air conditioning, everyone walked everywhere with the hot sun beating down on them. Putting oil on your head was calming and soothing, like putting lotion on a sunburn. Getting oil generously poured on your head was extravagant goodness. Likewise, when your waiter fills your cup to overflowing, he is giving you a LOT more than you need. How richly the Lord has blessed all of us – more clothes than we can fit in our closets, more food than we can fit in our freezers, more conveniences than our great grandparents could ever have dreamed of, not to mention the overflowing spiritual blessings including the opportunity to worship.

How else could King David conclude than to say – verse 6 – "Surely, goodness and love will follow me [singular again] all the days of my life." It's hard to define goodness. Maybe we can think of goodness as our material blessings. "Love" is often translated as "mercy," which could refer to spiritual blessings. David is piling up terms here to describe how blessed you are. The word "follow" is better translated as "pursue." God is going to chase you down and make sure that he gives you blessings upon blessings. Notice, also, when these overflowing blessings will chase after you – All the days of your life, every day. Every day, your shepherd has a purpose and plan to bless you.

And on top of all of that, you even have heaven itself to look forward to. Again, this is personal – "I will dwell." The perfection that was lost in Eden will be restored. Constant and complete contentment and peace and joy. Nothing ever will make you sad again. The last noun in Psalm 23 is the same as the first noun – the LORD, all capitals, the saving God who promised a Savior to Adam and Eve will also take you safely to heaven. One of the most famous pictures of Jesus as our Good Shepherd has him carrying one little lamb in his arm. You are that little lamb in Jesus' arm. He is taking care of you as an individual. You may have lots to pray about, but you have nothing to worry about. You are saved. The LORD is your (sg.) shepherd. Amen.