

Other Sheep
John 10:14-16
April 21, 2013

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Grace, mercy, and peace from the Good Shepherd, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Every coin has two sides. Each side is different, but both sides belong to the same coin. In similar way, the Bible talks about life with this two-sided approach. Psalm 23 talks about life here on earth – the pluses and the minuses. Revelation chapter 7 talks about life as it is being lived right now in heaven. In the 10th chapter of John's Gospel account, Jesus explains how these two sides of life are connected.

In Psalm 23, David says: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death* (Ps 23:4 KJV).

Life has its joys and celebrations; births, graduations, marriages, birthdays, holidays. However, even during our times of celebration, we live under the shadow of our mortal enemy, death. Death hangs over humanity like an angry storm cloud. No one is exempt.

We can't party enough to make us forget that death lurks somewhere in the future for each of us. Mark Twain used to say that the first thing he did every morning was check the obituaries to see if his name was there.

No one is exempt. Whether you are five, 15, or 50, everyone suffers the ill effects of living in a world that has been broken and corrupted by sin. We all contract diseases, we all have defects, and, unless Jesus returns first, we all will die.

But God is not to blame. God didn't create people to live like this. Our condition is the result of the first sin in the Garden of Eden. Since then, all life on earth, human or otherwise, has been lived under the shadow of death.

When death's shadow creeps over a loved one, we feel the pain of loss. A hole is torn in our lives that can never fully mend. Our todays and tomorrows will never be exactly as we had planned them.

Our walk through the valley of the shadow of death can seem like a lonesome walk that ends in isolation and despair. But Christians have God's promise that we don't walk alone. We have a friend who has walked this same path. Our Good Shepherd is always at our side to comfort and guide us.

Unlike us, who have no choice, our Savior deliberately stepped into the shadow of death. He left heaven to be one of us. He became as human as we are, but he didn't sin. His life was a visible display of God's love for us. Our shepherd healed the sick, loved the unlovable, touched the untouchable, raised the dead, cast out demons, and forgave sin.

After he had done all of this, he accepted death on the cross in order to be our atoning sacrifice. Jesus paid the price we could never afford, to earn for us a life we could never deserve. Because Jesus has done this, David talks about the pluses of living this life as one of God's children.

Verse two of our psalm begins: *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.* When a child of God gives himself or herself over completely to the Lord, when we lay down all of our pride and our defenses, God will give us times of physical, emotional, and spiritual rest that cannot come from anywhere else.

That same verse continues: *He leadeth me beside the still waters.* Looking out over a glass-smooth lake or sitting next to a slow-moving river has a way of soothing a troubled heart. Something like that, but to a much greater extent, happens when God brings tranquility to the restless soul. The child of God knows that no problem or evil in life is greater than our Savior.

Jesus said: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid* (Jn 14:27 NIV). At our baptism, we were not only baptized into Christ's death, but also into his resurrection. That means that our peace in Jesus is eternal.

Next, we hear: *He restoreth my soul* (Ps 23:3 KJV). There is a time in every life when a person is alienated from God. That time might be before the baptism of a baby or adult or during a time when a Christian walks away from God. Sometimes we may not actually be separated from God but our sinful nature makes us feel that way. Yet, we can take comfort in the fact that God promises to restore the repentant soul. Scripture promises us: *A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out* (Is 42:3 NIV).

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake (Ps 23:3 KJV). It is wonderful to know that God has not left us to wander aimlessly down the road of life. The Lord is at work in every believer. He helps us to recognize the evils that the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh tell us are good. If we give God our complete trust and control over our lives, he will guide us past the dangers and temptations of daily life.

We are not alone as we walk the valley of the shadow. Jesus has walked it before us, and he is walking it with us.

Now let's change our focus. Let's move from the valley of the shadow of death to the

mountaintop, the other side of the coin. Let's gaze into heaven and see the life that those who have gone before us are living and the life that we will someday live.

In Revelation, John tells us that he saw a great multitude of people from every nation, tribe, people, and language. Who were these people? These are the folks that have come out of the great tribulation, those who have passed beyond the valley of the shadow of death.

These people are beyond our human vision, but John saw them and reported on their joyful existence with the Lord. Our loved ones, who are now part of this multitude, have laid aside the burdens and battles of this life.

What entitles them to be in such a place? How is it that they can stand in the presence of a holy God? Verse 14 of our reading from Revelation answers these questions *They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb* (Rev 7:14 NIV). That washing applied to them the cleansing power of the shed blood of Jesus.

You have received that same washing. It became yours in your baptism. At your baptism you were washed in the blood of the Lamb of God. You received forgiveness for all your sins. That means that, when your life on earth is through, you, too, will be worthy to join those who live forever with our Savior.

If there were a window into heaven, you would see all those who have gone before us in the faith, standing among the other white-robed saints. Their faith in the Christ of God brought their forgiveness. Their robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb. They left this valley of the shadow and have entered eternal life in Paradise. Close your eyes and picture your loved ones there.

Right now, the saints of all times, your loved ones, my loved ones are praising God. They're singing: *Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!* (Rev 7:12). They sing because the Lamb, at the center of the throne, is their Shepherd. They sing because Jesus has led them to springs of living water. They sing because they have been freed from all sorrow and pain.

We can join them in their song. By the grace of God, our destination is with those white-robed saints. We are confident that soon we will join God's heavenly saints, and remain with him and them forever.

We started in the valley and moved to the mountaintop. Now let's look at Jesus' words in the Gospel reading to see how these two forms of existence are connected. Jesus said: *I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd* (Jn 10:16 NIV).

When Jesus spoke these words, most believers were Jewish. Jesus speaks of a time when the other people, the Gentiles, would be brought into the family of faith.

The age of the Christian Church is intended to be the time when all people – every nationality, ethnic group, race, and language – are welcomed into the flock of our Good Shepherd.

In our Creed, we confess to believe in one holy Christian church. That's more a matter of faith than something we can see right now. Today we see divisions in the Church. There are many denominations and many conflicting opinions. Still, in all this disunity, there is one universal Christian Church made up of all who believe that Christ paid the price of their sin.

The relationship between the valley of the shadow and life everlasting is the bridge that Jesus built between the two. The faith that ushered your now-departed loved ones into God's presence is the same faith that will someday lead you home.

There is one last point that must be made. There is something that hasn't changed from the time of the disciples to today. Jesus told the disciples about two kinds of sheep; those inside the fold and those outside the fold. You and I are inside the fold. We're safe. Our Good Shepherd stands guard over us to protect us from everything that would damage our eternal life with him.

However, there are still billions who don't know such care and protection. If the sheep outside the fold are to hear the voice of the Shepherd and come in, it's up to us to take the Shepherd's voice to them. We, who know the way home, have been left here to guide those who are lost.

Take a good look around. Work hard to get the feeling of what it must be like to think that what you see around you is all there is. With that firmly in mind, look forward to the life that awaits all those who leave this world with faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. Then find one of those lost sheep and introduce that person to the Good Shepherd.