

The Lord Is My Shepherd
Psalm 23
July 23, 2017

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Today's readings contain a lot of "shepherd" talk. Both David and Saint Peter say Jesus is our shepherd. Jesus calls himself our shepherd. Is Jesus your shepherd? If you claim Jesus as your shepherd, then you are saying that you are a part of Jesus' flock. Claiming Jesus as your shepherd means there are certain things you can expect from your shepherd.

An earthly shepherd does three things for his flock. He protects his sheep. He saves them from dangers they have no way of fending off. He provides for his sheep. He makes sure that the flock is brought to safe pastures and clean drinking water. He never leaves his sheep. Sheep are like young children, the minute you turn your back they wander off somewhere.

If Jesus is our shepherd, can we expect the same things from him? To answer that question we will follow the shepherd job description from the 23rd Psalm.

Our shepherd protects.

King David begins with: *The Lord is my shepherd.* The first two words here are of supreme importance. David doesn't say "a" lord, but "The Lord." David makes it very clear that there isn't a multitude of ways to salvation. There isn't an assortment of gods from which to choose. There is one and only one Lord.

The natural question here is, "If there is only one Lord who saves, who is the Lord?" Jesus answers that question in today's Gospel reading: *I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture* (Jn 10:9 NIV). There are three things to remember in this verse.

Jesus says there is only one way to everlasting life – a single gate. If you are to be saved, that salvation can only come by way of that one gate, and that gate is your shepherd, Jesus.

Next, Jesus says: *whoever enters through me.* I looked up the word "whoever" and here's what Webster says: *whatever person or no matter who.* That means that anyone and everyone can turn to Jesus. Our shepherd is everyone's shepherd.

The third thing is: *will be saved*. No ifs, no ands, no buts. No maybes, no perhaps. Anyone and everyone who passes from this world through the gate of Jesus will be saved. A rock solid guarantee from the God who has never broken a promise.

Notice also that we are saved by Jesus, not by anything we do. Paul writes in the book of Titus: *When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy* (Tit 3:4-5 NIV).

One more word in this short phrase that deserves our attention is the word “my.” David writes: *The Lord is my shepherd*. That’s what is meant by having a personal relationship with Jesus. While Jesus is everyone’s shepherd, he is your personal shepherd. The next time to say or read the 23rd Psalm, place special emphasis on the word “my.” *The Lord is MY shepherd*.

Our shepherd provides.

The last half of verse one contains a wonderful promise: *I shall not want*. This promise begins today and runs through the rest of your life. From now until the time God calls you home, God has promised to tend to your needs; physical needs, emotional needs, spiritual needs. The Philippian Christians were told: *My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus* (Php 4:19 NIV).

Verse two tells us: *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters* (Ps 23:2 NIV). Green pastures and still waters are absolute necessities for sheep, and a good shepherd knows that. A good shepherd is very careful to know and provide what is best for his sheep.

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, does that for us. Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. Jesus cares for us more than we care for ourselves. Because of that, Jesus is very careful to be sure we are provided with the things that are best for us. Those things might not always meet our wants, but they always meet our needs.

Verse three talks about two more ways our shepherd provides for us: *He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake* (Ps 23:3 NIV). Jesus does something for us that no one else could ever do. He restores our soul. Once again I asked my friend Webster for a definition: Restore – *to bring back to or put back into a former or original state*.

Sin destroyed our relationship with God. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus restores the righteousness we lost when Adam and Eve sinned. Jesus restores our relationship with the Father.

Once restored, Jesus leads us on the right paths. He doesn’t just lead us to the path of right behavior, he leads us on the path that will take us to the right destination. Jesus leads us in the direction we were originally meant to go.

In his first letter, Saint John writes: *If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin* (1 Jn 1:7 NIV). The pathway that Jesus leads us on is the pathway to eternal life. Jesus never has and never will lead someone in the wrong direction.

Our shepherd is present.

Verse four: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me* (Ps 23:4 NIV).

Jesus is with us when times are tough. Jesus is with us when it seems like the rest of the world is against us. That's a great comfort, because we know that hard times are coming. It's never a matter of if trouble will come. It's always a matter of when trouble comes.

Jesus tells us: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world* (Jn 16:33 NIV). And Saint Peter, who had more than his share of difficulties, adds to that thought: *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you* (1 Pe 4:12 NIV).

We live in a sinful and sin-filled world. No one is exempt from the consequences of sin. Even Jesus, when he walked this earth, was plagued by the sin that pervades everything about our world. Jesus never sinned, but he had to tolerate the hatred, the pain, the suffering, and the death that always accompanies sin.

What a joy it is to know that Jesus knows and understands our situation. How comforting it is to know that our shepherd is at our side no matter what may come. In the most trying times of life, even when death is standing at our door, we have a Savior Shepherd, who is closer than a friend.

Jesus says that Christians are *in the world* (Jn 17:11), but not *of the world* (Jn 17:14). Peter called us: *strangers and aliens in the world* (1 Pet 2:11). Because we live in this world, but we don't belong to this world; because we are strangers and aliens, King David writes: *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over* (Ps 23:5 NIV).

Of the over seven billion people on this planet, over five billion are not Christian. That means that we are always in the presence of people who don't understand us, people who hate Jesus, people who hate us because of our relationship with Jesus. We are always in the presence of our enemies.

However, even in the presence of our enemies, we have the reassurance that our shepherd is at our side. Our enemies see how our shepherd cares for and protects us. He anoints us. Anointing is a sign of honor and joy. David says: *our cup runneth over*.

That means the provision of our shepherd is greater than our need.

The last verse of this psalm is a perfect description of the Christian life: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever* (Ps 23:6 NIV).

The Hebrew word which is translated here as “follow” is more correctly translated “chase or pursue.” That gives us a much different picture of God’s goodness and mercy. The goodness and mercy of God isn’t just wandering around behind us, it is pursuing us. That means that you can’t outrun God’s mercy.

You can’t go so far as to be out of the reach of God’s mercy. And, to find God’s mercy at any time in your life, even if you done your best to run away from God, all you must do is turn around and he’s there. You may have walked ten thousand steps away from God, but returning to him is only one step back.

The more you walk with God, the more joy will permeate your life. Life with the Lord just gets better and better, until the best occurs and he calls you home. When that day comes, you will complete this psalm. You will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.