

The Good Shepherd
Andrew Kneeland, May 8, 2022
Psalm 23

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

A U.S. soldier told a story about something he saw in the old Soviet Union. He was watching a road from a distance and noticed two shepherds coming towards each other from opposite sides of the valley. They were each leading flocks of hundreds of sheep.

The two shepherds were apparently friends, and they stopped at the road and talked for several minutes. While they were talking the sheep began mixing together into one, huge group.

There wasn't much to watch in rural Russia so the soldier was fascinated by what he saw. He couldn't imagine how complicated it would be to sort out which sheep belonged to which shepherd; they all looked identical.

After a few minutes the two shepherds said goodbye and took off again in opposite directions, following their original course. The first shepherd let out a brief shout, and about half of the combined herd of sheep started following him. The second shepherd gave a short little yell, too, and the other half of sheep turned to follow him.

In just a matter of seconds, both herds were separated again, following their shepherd. These shepherds didn't need an elaborate sorting system or a detailed plan for keeping track of whose sheep was whose. Their sheep knew their voice. Sheep know the voice of their shepherd.

In addition to being Mother's Day, this is also Good Shepherd Sunday, the day we remember Jesus as our shepherd: the one who provides for us, guides us, and keeps us safe. To help us think about our Good Shepherd this morning we're going to walk through those verses from our Psalm, Psalm 23.

Before we dive in, though, let's pray:

Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for being our Good Shepherd. As we remember and honor our Mothers today, and thank you for how they love and provide for us, help us to also remember how you perfectly love and provide for us. Bless our

time in this familiar passage this morning. Use your Holy Word to work in our hearts, stirring up life and repentance in us. In your name we pray, amen.

Our Shepherd **provides what we need**. Listen again to the first two verses of Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

This is a picturesque scene of sheep with their shepherd, isn't it? You can just imagine a perfect spring day. The temperature is perfect; there are just the right amount of clouds in the sky and breeze on the air. When you need to eat there is no shortage of beautiful, green grass. There is a calm and safe creek nearby for whenever you need to drink.

This is everything a sheep could ever want. All of their needs are provided for by a shepherd who is doing everything he can for his precious sheep.

This scene feels different from what we experience, doesn't it? "I shall not want" might be true in a Terry Redlin painting, but not in *our* lives. Life is hardly ever as easy or painless or carefree as these verses seem to describe. We're reminded every day that we live in a broken world, not a picturesque one.

Fathers walk away, leaving single mothers to raise their children. Boys fall into a cruel, never-ending cycle of drug abuse and recovery. Girls get trapped in a world of shame and search for approval in all the wrong places. "I shall not want"? All too often we ARE in want; we DO have needs and things AREN'T perfect.

If Jesus is our Good Shepherd, why doesn't he care about these things? Why can't we have "green pastures"?

The hills of Israel—in the time of David, the time of Jesus, and still today—are arid, dry, and rocky. When we think of "green pastures" we think of farmland. We think of tall, green grass that waves in the gentle breeze. But there were no luscious "green pastures" in Israel.

The wind that blows over the Mediterranean Sea brings small amounts of moisture over the rocks; just enough for little tufts of grass to grow here and there.

Shepherds would find a hillside and slowly lead his sheep so they could find these little tufts of grass. This is what “green pastures” meant to David: not a never-ending supply of food for the sheep, but enough food for the day. The shepherd gives the sheep what they need for right now. What about tomorrow? The sheep trusted the shepherd.

Our Good Shepherd DOES care about our physical needs, and he DOES provide us with “green pastures” and “still waters.” He gets us through the day. He gives us spiritual food and spiritual drink that *daily* provides for our greatest needs. The bread of life and living water.

John 6: “Jesus then said to them, “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

Our Good Shepherd provides what we need. He also **guides us through our lives**. Hear again verses three and four:

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Now this is a more accurate picture of our lived reality, isn't it? Not a picturesque, green field but “the valley of the shadow of death.” Another translation has: “the darkest valley.” We feel this, don't we? Everywhere we turn these days we're harshly confronted with the fact that we are living in a very fractured world. I'm not very old but even I can feel that there are less and less moments of carefree innocence in the world today; and more and more examples of evil and brokenness.

But our Good Shepherd guides us. “Even though” we are walking through this evil world—with sickness and disease on one side and pain and heartbreak on the other—we are not alone.

The most important tool a shepherd has is a staff. Shepherds keep their staff with them at all times; they're constantly using their shepherd's staff to guide and protect their sheep.

A staff can poke and guide a sheep who is wandering off the trail. A staff can be used to fight off wild animals, like a bear or a lion who wants to break up and harm the flock. The hook of a staff can be used to grab a sheep and save it from a dangerous place.

All shepherds have a staff. Our Good Shepherd does, too. The staff he uses to guide us through our lives is the Word of God.

In this Book are rules and requirements that show us what we should do and where we should go and how we should live. The law of God is a guide that shows us how life works best; it's a lamp for our feet and a light for our path.

If we are wandering away from the shepherd's safe trail, the Law of God will correct us and help us return to where we should be. If we're caught in a dangerous place, with a temptation to sin right before us, the shepherd's staff of God's Word will fend off the devil and beat him back to where he came from and the staff will hook us and bring us back to safety.

The shepherd's staff also gives the sheep comfort. We are led in paths of righteousness, of holiness, of purity, of goodness. This righteousness is not ours, but the Psalmist says "for His name's sake." We are led to walk along the path of Christ's righteousness.

The obedient and perfect life that Christ lived paved a road for us to follow. The path might lead through some scary and dangerous places—a valley of sickness, a curve of persecution, a hill of an unexpected burden—but the path itself is sure. Our Good Shepherd leads us on this path of Christ's righteousness; His worthiness becomes OUR worthiness, His perfect record becomes OUR perfect record, His inheritance becomes OUR inheritance. His resurrection becomes, one day, OUR resurrection.

Those who wander from the path of righteousness give up the sure, safe footing of Christ's path. They instead choose to rely on their own path, trying to find their own way and rely on their own worth and their own record and their own abilities.

At Judgment Day these wandering sheep will need to answer for their countless sins and they WON'T have the sure, safe path of Christ's righteousness to stand upon. The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life.

Our Good Shepherd guides us through our lives. He also **keeps us safe from all threats**. The last two verses of Psalm 23:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The path of life that we walk often goes through valleys of the shadow of death, but we also come across threats and dangers. Lions trying to snatch us out of the safe arms of our Good Shepherd; wolves trying to deceive and ensnare us.

But even “in the presence of my enemies,” our Good Shepherd protects, guides, and provides for us. All the days of our lives our Good Shepherd will love us. All the days of our lives we will be anointed and set apart, chosen to be in the flock of God’s family. All the days of our lives we will live in the perfectly safe and secure house of the Lord.

Our Good Shepherd protects us and wants only the best for his sheep. And He will go to great lengths for our sake. He said in John 10, from our Gospel lesson today: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep.”

There’s another story about a shepherd in Israel about 50 years ago. He led his sheep into a walled-off area for the night, and he laid down in the entryway and fell asleep. He was jolted awake by the sound of a wolf attacking one of his sheep. The wolf had the sheep in his strong jaws but the shepherd hit the wolf with his staff and started wrestling with it, ignoring the wolf’s strong bites and scratches.

The shepherd killed the wolf with his staff and rescued the sheep, but died a few hours later from his wounds. He was found holding the sheep in his arms. The newspaper headline the next day was: “Sheep Alive, Covered in Shepherd’s Blood.” Our Good Shepherd keeps us safe.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” This is our promise. This is our hope. The path of our lives may wander through challenging terrain and difficult valleys, but

it's a stable and firm path laid by Christ Himself. And as beloved sheep of the Good Shepherd, we will be loved forever.

Amen.