

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

The word of God for this morning is Psalm 23.

“A Psalm of David. The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. 4 Yea, 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. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.”

So far our text. Dear fellow sheep of the Good Shepherd.

Before us today is likely the best known and likely the most loved Psalm. David as a shepherd was intimately familiar with the work. He used the language of a shepherd to declare the mercies of his Good Shepherd.

David begins his inspired Psalm with, **“The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.”** In this verse we see the culmination of the entire Psalm. A snapshot of what the entire Psalm has to say to us.

For this Psalm to make any sense we need to consider and remember throughout the entire Psalm who the Shepherd of the flock is. It is the Lord. Your Bible may have a different way of pointing out the word Lord as being different in this case. It may be capitalized or italicized to show that the word used here is Jehovah, the name of the Covenant God.

In the name Jehovah we have the fullness of the God-head expressed to us. The all powerful God of creation. The One who with His words created the heavens and the earth. The One who sustains and preserves it. It is of the utmost importance for us to remember who our Shepherd is. He isn't one who only takes care of His flock when it suites Him. One who isn't able to spiritually attend to His flock only on occasion. Jehovah our Shepherd is the all powerful God. The only One who is able and is qualified to step up to this position and care for His sheep.

We are His no matter what people say. As His creation He has ownership of us no matter what; even if people deny His sovereignty over them. But Jehovah, the Good Shepherd has also purchased us at huge cost. We are made His by the price of the Only Begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ. When we receive a gift sometimes we like to know how much it cost. We sometimes feel that the gift is worth more when it came at a great price. Look at how much the Lord loves us. He loves His sheep so much that He paid for you with the blood of Jesus Christ.

Continuing with the language of a shepherd David continues, **“He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.”**

Remarkably a sheep will not lie down unless some criteria are met. 1. That the sheep feel free from fear. 2. That the sheep feel free from friction or harm from the rest of the flock. 3. That the sheep be free of pests. 4. That the sheep is free from hunger.

The only true way for a sheep of the Shepherd to feel free from danger is to believe that the Shepherd is willing to lay down His life for me. To put ones head to the ground and close ones eyes takes a great deal of trust with all the predators around us. But knowing that the Lord is the kind of God to not become lazy in His responsibilities over us gives us comfort. My master is there.

The Lord is my Shepherd not only because He guards me from outside dangers but because He guards me from ones inside the fold. We can at times like sheep begin to try and exercise a perceived authority over the other sheep. Like in a chicken coop which has a pecking order. A herd of cattle can have a horning order. Sheep have a butting order.

But the most amazing thing happens when an attentive shepherd comes into the flock. The sheep cease to try and grandstand and take over the flock because they know the true master of the flock has arrived. Even amongst ourselves from time to time we begin to think highly of ourselves. We are greater than the true Shepherd. But when we have our eyes retrained onto the Good Shepherd Jesus we find ourselves being content with being a sheep.

This is done in the life of a Christian through the study of the word. Along with being content as part of the flock we also know that Jesus will take care of all our needs through His word. He will get us through the times when the pests are buzzing around us. When we need to be fed in His word and He promised that it would fill us up. When we keep our gaze upon the Good Shepherd all the needs are supplied for us to be at peace and to lie down in green pastures.

And along with being fed the Good Shepherd supplies us with clean healthy water to drink. Sheep out of frustration will stop off and try and drink from polluted water. The sinfulness of man is seen in this by not wanting to drink from the water that God supplies to us in His word. Even the believing sheep can at times become frustrated and want to drink from polluted waters. But in trusting in the Good Shepherd and drinking only from His word we will be safe from harm and danger.

“He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.” Sheep are known to become ‘cast’. A cast sheep is one that gets stuck on its back. Gasses begin to build up part of its digestive track and the sheep can die within hours. A cast sheep is one that is usually heavy with weight or likes to lay in depressions in the ground. Even a heavy coat can cause a cast sheep.

I believe that when life gets hard we can sometimes become lazy and heavy with grief. We end up on our backs because of all the dirt of life being accumulated in our coats.

But our Good Shepherd is there for us again. He is attentive and only gives us what we can handle. He sees us lying on our backs and graciously comes and turns us over. He trims the cares of life away by sheering us. All of this to strengthen us and to build our character and trust in Him so that we don’t end up cast in the first place.

Sheep also have the tendency of walking and grazing in the same places over and over again. Unless they are tended to by a faithful shepherd they will end up walking in ruts and trying to feed upon grass that is burned and actually end up tearing out the roots of the grass by walking over it.

If we as sheep of the Shepherd aren't led off to new grass and led away from ruts we will die from a lack of nourishment. Our Good and Faithful Shepherd leads us into new paths of His word. Not as leading us into new doctrines but leads us into new places in His word so that we continue to grow. If we only feed in one place and are not led off into new areas we will die. Going off into new areas can be difficult at times because it's scary for us. But Jesus said that He Himself is the way, the truth, and the life. Where the Lord leads us in His word will only lead to new growth and nourishment.

All of this being done for the sake of His name. Just like an earthly shepherd who takes pride in leading his flocks to fresh new grass, the Lord would be delinquent in His love for us if He didn't do the same. But He knows that we are obstinate sheep and He leads us so that His name isn't soiled by being an unfaithful Shepherd.

“Yea, 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.” Until now we find David using the summer fields as a descriptor of Jesus as our Good Shepherd. But there is a part of the year when herdsman will take their flocks into new areas to feed.

These new grounds are found in higher elevations. The safest way to get to them is in the valleys instead of along the ridge line. But we also find this travel as being the dark parts of the life of the sheep. We do have this symbolized for us as the parts of the sheep's life, our life, which seems to be the most dangerous. When we look away from the Shepherd, life becomes difficult. We look at it as valleys of death where there is nothing but darkness. This can be found in our struggles with sin. They can be found in the loss of life. They can be found in the temptations that are set before us by our flesh.

But our faithful Shepherd with His rod and His staff corrects and comforts us. The rod of a shepherd is used to not only fight off the wild animals but to also be used upon the sheep. A shepherd would actually become quite adept at throwing his rod to startle his flock to lead them back into the fold. Do we have a picture of God's chastisement upon us? Is it His law? It very well could be.

We also see the Lord using His staff, gently leading us back into His fold. If we fall the Lord doesn't leave us to die either. He uses the hook in His staff to pick us back up and set us upon our feet. He uses it to pull us up from dangerous places where we because of our sinfulness have fallen.

He is with us. He comforts us and cares for us with the full usage of His word in Law and Gospel. Because of His faithfulness we will fear no evil.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.”

When the shepherd finally gets his flock to the higher ground it is commonly known as a table. These are called aplands or tablelands. The word we commonly use for such lands as mesas. This is a Spanish

word that means table. The word in the Hebrew actually refers to the table prepared for a king's banquet. The shepherd will go up before the sheep in the summer time to prepare these fields. He will look for the table that will have the best grazing. He will also prepare the table by pulling weeds and neutralizing any threats from the pools of water that have accumulated in them.

Our Shepherd has done the same thing for us. He went before us and experienced everything that we would. He took upon the burden of suffering every temptation by the hands of Satan and the world. He suffered all things so that we could go forward knowing that our Good Shepherd when He was slaughtered for our transgressions had lived a perfect life for us. Because He through every temptation never sinned.

A faithful shepherd would also anoint the heads of his sheep with an oil mixture. The nasal flies would bother the sheep and they would stomp and thrash their heads in the hopes of relief. The mixture of oil upon the head and nose of the sheep would relieve them and put them at peace.

The little things in life sometimes buzz around us like flies. The ointment of the word soothes and calms us. The word gives us relief from the things that 'bug us'. Often these things can so consume us that we refuse to have our Good Shepherd anoint us. We allow the flies to lay their eggs and they in turn burrow their way into our sinuses and they become a threat to our life.

But our Faithful Shepherd again cares for His sheep. Using His rod and staff to settle us and anoints us with His word which soothes us. Soon we are healed from the onslaught of pests in our lives. We can graze and be filled and then peacefully rest having all our cares taken away.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever."

When a sheep has such a Shepherd as the one found in our text for today we can truly come to understand that He will continue to be faithful. He will care for us this way all our days. What sheep would want to leave the fold of such a Shepherd?

It only makes sense then that a sheep would want to dwell in the house, maybe even to say the pen of the Lord.

What makes a good shepherd Good is solely based upon His actions. Our Good Shepherd cares for us. We are His. We were purchased at a great price. Not with gold or silver but with the holy, innocent, precious blood of the Shepherd Himself.

We know that there is no better master to be found anywhere else because the proof of it is in the way He cares for all of us in our individual lives.

Jesus is your Good Shepherd. Rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.