

Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Amen.

A psalm of David.

- The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
 he leads me beside quiet waters,
³ he restores my soul.
 He guides me in paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
⁴ 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.
⁵ You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies.
 You anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely goodness and love will follow me
 all the days of my life,
 and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Dear brothers and sisters,

Were you able to say it along with me in your head without even looking down at the service folder? If you know any of the psalms by memory, I bet this is one of them. And that's a good thing, to be able to take Psalm 23 with you wherever you go, every day of your life, all the way down into your grave and beyond: ***The LORD is my shepherd.***

One reason why it's so loved, I think, is the imagery. It makes a movie in your mind as you listen: the green pastures, the quiet waters, the paths of righteousness. And, of course, the shepherd: When you look at his face in your mental image, you see Jesus, don't you? Jesus, the Good Shepherd, leading his sheep to eat and to drink and to rest. And there's someone else that you recognize in the picture, too. Do you see yourself? Not a herd of woolly, four-legged animals, and not just a crowd of faceless Christians either. The emphasis is on you: ***The LORD is MY shepherd.***

David was a shepherd, and he wrote this in a land where shepherds and sheep dotted the landscape and at a time when the title of shepherd was given to selfless leaders who cared more about the well-being of their people than they cared about themselves. Back then, to call your king a shepherd was the highest kind of compliment. 3,000 years later, our culture is different. I don't think I've ever seen a real shepherd in my whole life. And we don't call even our good leaders shepherds. But still, this shepherd-sheep metaphor isn't lost on us. You see the picture and you get what he's saying. You see Jesus; you see peace, tranquility, rest; and the picture's not complete unless you see yourself. ***The LORD is MY shepherd.***

All of that's easy. But maybe there is one hard part. The timing. That little word ***is***. It's not *The LORD WILL BE my shepherd*. This isn't a picture of heaven. This is earth, right now. This psalm ***is*** your entire life on earth with Jesus. Every morning when you roll out of bed and every night when you climb back in, God is saying that he ***is*** your shepherd. That it's his full-time job. That you are Jesus' little lamb. That you don't lack a thing, that there's nothing to fear, that your cup of blessing is so full there is no room for more. That's the hard part. Maybe it would be easier to believe if God were saying, *Be patient. Look at what I have waiting for you in heaven.* But that's not what he's saying. He's saying, *This is your life right now.*

We might want to respond, *Thanks for letting me know, because that's not what I see.* Do you see the green pastures and quiet waters? Is that where you spend your days? Or when you roll out of bed in the morning is your heart already torn up about the day ahead and when you climb back in at night you're just as stressed because you know you're going to have to do it all over again tomorrow? You can sing *I Am Jesus' Little Lamb* but you have trouble believing it, because you ARE in want, you DO have fears. As far as you can see, your cup of blessing ISN'T overflowing. And most days you don't see Jesus front. All you see is you all by yourself. Maybe surrounded by people, but still all alone.

That's the hard part, that little word ***is***. Psalm 23 isn't describing a future hope, but a present reality. Maybe a person listens to it and thinks, *Oh, I can't wait for this to come true.* But according to the psalm, it already is true. And the person who gets that might wonder: *Maybe it's not true.*

Of course, it is true. And, Lord-willing, you'll walk out of church today with your confidence that it's true refreshed. *I Am Jesus' Little Lamb.* And that renewed confidence that the LORD ***is*** your shepherd has everything to do with what it means that ***he***

makes [you] lie down in green pastures and leads [you] beside quiet waters. What does that mean? We can picture the lush pastures where there's plenty for a sheep to eat and the flowing streams where there's more than enough to drink. That's the metaphor, but in practical terms, what does that mean? It means that Jesus, your Shepherd, gives you food for your soul, and he doesn't hold back.

He restores your soul. Think it through. Why does he need to restore it? Because it gets beaten up. He gives it food and drink because it grows weak. Maybe bodies, but souls aren't restored by a long vacation or a good night's sleep. The green pastures and quiet waters aren't better food and more money. In practical terms, the green pastures and quiet waters—they're promises. They're words.

You get tired. Not the kind of tired from putting in a hard day's work and you collapse on the couch and it's actually satisfying because you accomplished something and now you can rest. This is the kind of tired that comes from being a faithful employee and all it gets you is scorn at work. From giving your all to make your marriage good—going the extra mile, turning the other cheek, the whole bit—but all it gets you is stepped on at home. You know that kind of tired? And it's doesn't only come from what other people do to you; you do it to yourself too. You beat yourself up for something you did and you can't undo it, someone you hurt and you can't heal their wound. You wage an internal war against yourself every day. You want to do what's good, but the evil you don't want to do, you keep on doing that instead—and you're tired. Not exhausted-yet-satisfied. More like a hamster in a wheel going nowhere. The I-can't-do-this-anymore exhaustion of the soul. You know that kind of tired?

Then it's a perfect day for you to be in church, because that's Psalm 23! Jesus, the Good Shepherd, takes the tired by the hand to green pastures and quiet waters and restores your soul. In practical terms, he doesn't do that by snapping his fingers and filling up your checking account and eliminating the stress from your job and the problems from your marriage. He doesn't undo all the damage your sin has ever done or hide every temptation to sin from your heart. That's heaven. This is still your life on earth—and God doesn't hide the fact that there are still journeys through dark valleys, there's still evil, there are still enemies.

The green pastures and quiet waters—they're promises. And the particular promise at the center of Psalm 23—literally at the center, the middle words, the most prominent place in Hebrew poetry—is this: You're not alone. God is with you. You can count it out: Nine lines above it. Nine lines below it: **You are with me.** That you can say to the LORD, to Jesus, **You are with me**—and not just that you can say it, but that it's true—that's what restores your soul.

You go to work and get stepped on, maybe you come home and it's more of the same. And you're tired. So Jesus comes with a promise: *You're not alone. I'm with you. I know what it's like to get stepped on too and I know from experience what you need. And no one can stop me from giving it to you.* You're beating yourself up for what you did. Or you're losing the battle over what you're doing. And you're tired. So Jesus comes with a promise: *You're not alone. I'm with you. You can't change the past, but I already died to forgive it and now I live to get you through it. You can't win the battle against temptation all by yourself, but you're not all by yourself. I've already won the war and I'm still with you in the struggle.* Those promises are the green pastures and quiet waters to which Jesus leads you, where he restores your soul. So that when you're walking through the valley of the shadow of the death, you don't need to fear any evil. Not because there's no evil, but because Jesus is stronger than it is. So that when you're in the presence of your enemies, you don't need to worry. Not because they aren't against you, but because they can't stop Jesus from setting your table and filling your cup.

So those green pastures and quiet waters where your Good Shepherd restores your soul and gives you rest, they're promises. But they're more than just words. They give you what they promise. They give you Jesus. *I am with you*, he says. That's more than a promise. That's Jesus at your side! You have him. And he has you. The One who laid down his life and died for you. The One who took it back up and lives for you. Who knows you, who forgives you, who helps you. And even if everyone else leaves you, he's still there to stay.

Isn't it a wonderful thing to be able to take Psalm 23 with you wherever you go, every day of your life, all the way to your grave and beyond? Let's wrap up the sermon by fast-forwarding to the day when it will be of greater value to you than all the gold in the world: the end. When you've eaten your last meal, when you realize you'll never see your house again. Some family is gathered at your bedside in tears and you're lying on the bed in pain and it's time to say goodbye. Then, with a lifetime of heartache behind you and still in the middle of the hardest part, I think then we'll be able to understand better than ever how valuable it is to be able to say, **The Lord is my shepherd**, to be able to say to Jesus, even in the valley of the shadow of death, **You are with me.** That he's not just there for everyone else, *He's MY shepherd.* That he's not just waiting for me that the end, *He IS with me, and IS means always. He IS—and nothing can tear me away. He IS—and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.* Amen.