

## A Timely and Encouraging Message: How to Follow the Good Shepherd

Jesus was the Master Storyteller and understood the power of utilizing a commonplace image to unlock the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps nothing was more familiar to His hearers in first-century Judea than the sight of a shepherd caring for his flock. Jesus seized on this familiar scenario to declare, “I am the good Shepherd, the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11). “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27).

It is no accident that God has chosen to call us sheep, the behavior of sheep and human beings is similar in many ways. Our mass mind (or mob instincts), our fears and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, our perverse habits are all parallels of profound importance. (Keller, Phillip, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, p.7)

David had the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, in mind when he penned Psalm 23. The entire psalm recounts the manner in which the Good Shepherd cares for the welfare of His sheep. We are “the sheep of His pasture” (Psalm 100:3), the happy recipients of His peace, protection, and privileges by grace through faith.

### I. Christ, Our Sovereign - Psalm 23:1

**The Lord.** First of all, I want you to notice that phrase “*the LORD.*” Israel was surrounded by nations who worshipped many gods. David knew there was one God - the great Sovereign, Eternal God - unchangeable, immutable, “the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come” (Revelation 4:8). **That’s Preeminence.**

**The Lord is *my* shepherd (Psalm 23:1).** Far above the trappings of manmade religion or the pageantry of tradition, David had activated faith. David knew the Lord as His Savior. **That’s a Personal Relationship.**

**I shall not want (Psalm 23:1).** Only through a personal relationship with Jesus can we enter into the abundant life that satisfies the soul. “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). When you delight in the Lord, the deepest needs of your heart will be met by Christ. He becomes your life, the desire of your heart. **That’s Provision.**

### II. Christ, Our Shepherd - Psalm 23:2-5

A. **“He makes me lie down in green pastures” (Psalm 23:2).** Sheep are timid, feeble, and defenseless creatures. Consequently, they are totally dependent on their shepherd to meet their needs.

In the course of time I came to realize that nothing so quieted and reassured the sheep as to see me in the field. The presence of their master and owner and protector put them at ease as nothing else could do, and this applied day and night. . . In the Christian life there is no substitute for the keen awareness that our Shepherd is nearby. There is nothing like Christ’s presence to dispel the fear, the panic, the terror of the unknown. The knowledge that my Master, my Friend, my Owner

has things under control even when they appear calamitous gives me sweet peace and rest. (Keller, Phillip, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, p. 25).

**“He leads me beside quiet waters” (Psalm 23:2).** Although sheep live in dry semi-arid country, they still require water. Obviously, finding suitable, safe water is one of the primary jobs of the shepherd. If sheep get thirsty and don’t have access to clean water supply, they will drink from polluted potholes, intaking parasites and disease.

Sheep can get much of their hydration from dew on the grass. Sheep, by habit, arise early in the morning to graze and feed. In the early hours, the vegetation is drenched with dew and a good bit of water is taken in as they graze before dawn. About 10:00 or 11:00 in the morning when the sheep have fed heavily, the sun will have burned off the dew and the sheep are ready to retire to the shade. There they would lie down to rest and ruminate during the hot part of the day.

The Lord knows where the still, quiet, deep, clean pure water is found. If we are faithful to meet with Him, He will provide His living water to quench our dry and thirsty soul. Those Christians who are the most serene, most confident, and most able to cope with life’s complexities are those who rise early each day to feed on God’s Word. Having met with the Lord at the start of the day, they approach the challenges of the day with souls that have been refreshed and satisfied in Jesus. And “the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension” (Philippians 4:7) guards our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Green pastures. Quiet waters. **That’s Peace.**

- B. “He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:3).** The term *cast down* is an old English shepherd’s term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up. Sheep look for a cool spot to rest and often lie down in a slight depression in the ground. If his center of gravity shifts, especially if his fleece is heavy, he can easily become cast down. He will frantically struggle to regain his balance, but often without success. The result can be catastrophic. In hot sunny weather, a cast sheep can die in a few hours. If it is cool and cloudy, he may survive several days, but becomes an easy target for predators.

The shepherd keeps an eye out for cast sheep. If he finds one, he rolls the sheep on its side and may have to lift him onto his feet, which have become stiff and painful. The shepherd supports the sheep and rubs his limbs to restore circulation while speaking words of comfort. Even so, the sheep may stumble or stagger as he strives to regain his equilibrium.

**“He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3).** The shepherd is careful to continually move his sheep from pasture to pasture. Otherwise, their trails will soon become muddy ruts, turning the pasture into desert wasteland. This ruins the land as well as the reputation of the shepherd. The greatest single safeguard that a shepherd has in handling his flock is to keep them on the move.

Like sheep, we can easily become cast down under the weight of anxiety or fear. We are prone to repeat sinful habit patterns that have become well-worn paths of least resistance. When we yield ourselves to Him and become intentional Bible students, we discover new habits or spiritual disciplines are created. “The steps of a man are established by the Lord, and He delights in his way” (Psalm 37:23). **That’s Purpose.**

- C. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me” (Psalm 23:4).** The shepherd takes the sheep from the green pastures and still waters of the lowlands,

up through the mountain passes to the high table lands of the summer range. He leads them gently, but persistently, up the paths that wind through the dark valleys. This is the way of the gentlest grades and along the most well-watered route.

These grassy glades are often on the floor of a steep walled canyon where predators like lions, bears, wolves, and leopards can take cover while stalking the flock from their elevated vantage point. In ancient Israel, these valleys were subject to sudden storms and flash floods. Sudden drops in temperature often brought freezing rains. This presented a real problem because sheep are susceptible to colds, pneumonia, and other respiratory complications. In spite of such hazards, the shepherd knows that this is still the best way to take his flock to the high country.

Beloved, we are residing safely in the hands of the Good Shepherd who is tenderly caring for us. “Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes” (Isaiah 40:11). We must realize that as Christians we will all walk through valleys. Fear can be the result, paralyzing us with the dread of the unknown, filling our hearts with worst case scenarios. Fear and faith cannot dwell together for any length of time. We must refuse fear and turn to the Lord. Then, we discover unexpected refreshment from God Himself. While none of us would choose these arduous journeys, the fresh discovery of the nearness of the Lord with His undeniable peace become treasured lessons. During these difficult seasons He trains us to move up higher in our walk with Him. David wrote, “He makes my feet like hinds’ feet, and sets me upon my high places” (Psalm 18:33).

As well as strengthening our faith, these seasons often serve to allow us to comfort others who find themselves walking along the same path. “Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

**“Your rod and Your staff they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).** In the Middle East, the shepherd carries two items: a rod and a staff.

**Rod** - His rod, fashioned from a tender sapling to fit his hand, would have a knob on one end. It was used as his main weapon of defense for both himself and his sheep. It could be to stun and/or kill a predator. If necessary, it was also used to discipline a wayward sheep.

Another interesting use of the shepherd’s rod was to examine and count the sheep. In the Old Testament this was referred to as passing “under the rod” (see Ezekiel 20:37). From time to time, the shepherd would stop each sheep as it passed out of the gate by stretching out his rod. He could use his rod to part the fleece to thoroughly examine his sheep. He would run his skillful hands over the body, feeling for any issues and looking for injuries and/or parasites. This was referred to as having passed “under the rod” indicating he had been assessed and counted.

**Staff** - While the rod conveys the concept of authority, the shepherd’s staff was designed for the comfort of the sheep. He used his staff to lift a newborn sheep and reunite it to his mother if they became separated. He could bring a sheep close for examination. If he was guiding his flock along a new path or dangerous trail, he would gently exert pressure on the side of the sheep. It also helped the shepherd rescue a wayward sheep who had gotten himself in a perilous situation.

God has given us the Word of God as our external control and the Comforter, the Spirit of God, as our internal control. Obedience to the Word and surrender to the Holy Spirit allow us to put on the whole “armor of God” and stand strong “in the strength of His might” (see Ephesians 6:10-17). **That’s Protection.**

- D. **“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Psalm 23:5).** When David referred to a *table*, he may have been thinking of the high plateaus of the sheep ranges. The shepherd would go ahead of the sheep and prepare the pasture before moving his sheep to the new grazing area. He would locate water sources, clear springs of blockage from leaves and pull up poisonous plants. He was also attentive to keep an eye out for predators. He would trap or hunt them down to protect his sheep from being picked off in an unsuspecting moment.

God created us for communion with Him and with community with others in the household of faith. Fellowship in the Scripture is often pictured by sharing a meal (the table of showbread in the OT and the Last Supper in the NT are a few instances). When we walk through challenging times while refusing to deny the faith, He prepares a meal and invites us, “Come and dine” (John 21:12 KJV). Satan and his minions watch in dismay and defeat as we commune with the Lord despite the difficult circumstance the enemy orchestrated to trap us.

**“You have anointed my head with oil; my cup runs over” (Psalm 23:5).** Sheep are especially troubled by a particular variety of flies that buzz around their faces, eyes and nose. These insects can infiltrate the sheep creating dangerous infestations. They are so annoying they will cause the sheep to beat their heads against trees, rocks or brush. They may grub in the ground for relief or stamp their feet repeatedly. Some may run themselves until they drop from sheer exhaustion. Others are injured in their headlong rushes of panic. Still others are killed outright in their frantic dash to relieve their misery. At the first sign of the pests, the shepherd would apply an oil to their faces, and then pour it over their heads to prevent serious repercussions.

Oil in the Scripture is (usually) a picture of the Holy Spirit. We receive the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion, but we daily need a fresh anointing from Him. This occurs as we seek to know the Lord more fully through His Word and yield in obedience to it. The Word renews our minds while the Spirit of God makes it possible to rise above the aggravations and annoyances of life. **That’s Power.**

### III. Christ, Our Savior - Psalm 23:6

**“Surely goodness and loving-kindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Psalm 23:6).** The blessings of eternal life begin at the moment of conversion, giving our lives here on earth meaning and purpose as we prepare for the Kingdom of heaven and an eternity with Christ and His bride the Church. **That’s Permanence.**

“Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Hebrews 13:20-21