

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

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Our 2021 Vacation Bible School goes online tomorrow, For the second year we are holding a virtual VBS, with opening chapel, lessons, crafts, music and ways of growing in God’s Word. The theme for our VBS this year is Jesus, Our Good Shepherd. Interestingly, the lessons for today have references to shepherds and sheep. The psalm for today is the one that must be the most familiar of all psalms and is known as the “Shepherd’s Psalm”. We are going to walk through it, and as we do, we will rejoice in the love of our Saviour, who surrounds us with His love and care.

1. *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

- Our Lord Jesus Christ is the great shepherd of the sheep. He says to us: *“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.”* (John 10:14, ESV) Every need—every single need—is provided for by our Shepherd. We need not strive for things that don’t matter. He gives us what is necessary for our lives, for our forgiveness, for our eternal well-being.
- The bible also tells us that *“we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”* (Psalm 100:3, ESV) While we want to have this warm, cuddly image of sheep, the truth is something far different. Sheep are not the smartest animals in the barnyard. They have a reputation for wandering, for getting into dangerous situations, which is why Isaiah says: *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”* (Isaiah 53:6, ESV) Sheep need a shepherd, because they aren’t good at foraging and finding food for themselves. They can be cast, which means they have tripped and fallen onto their backs, and in that position they are unable to right themselves again. They easily become lost, and they blindly follow the lead sheep, even when that sheep leads them to slaughter. And this is the way that Scripture refers to us—like these dumb, thoughtless and often helpless animals. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus sees the crowds and we are told *“he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”* (Mark 6:34, ESV) As we said, our Shepherd provides for all our needs. Our greatest need is spiritual—we need forgiveness, and the Shepherd provides that as He *lays down his life for the sheep.* (John 10:11 - ESV). With that forgiveness is the assurance of life in the Shepherd who says: *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.* (John 10:17-18 - ESV) He lives, and we live in Him. He provides for all of our life, as He says: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.* (John 10:10 - ESV)

2. *He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.*

- The Saviour who comes to give us life surrounds us with His love and care. He is with us everywhere we go. He is *beneath* us, for He is the green pasture in which we rest. Jesus says: *Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* (Matthew 11:28 - ESV) In all the cares and worries of life, we find rest in Him.
 - He is also *beside* us as we walk by the still waters. Jesus is the water that brings life. As He told the woman at the well: *“but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”* (John 4:14, ESV)
- The still waters also symbolize peace. Jesus is the prince of peace. He says to His flock: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.* (John 14:27 - ESV) We keep looking for a worldly peace. In this world where sin clings to us and affects everything around us, we cannot find peace. But the lamb that stays close to the shepherd knows His peace, as He leads us to the life He has won for us through His death and resurrection.

3. *He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.*

- The Shepherd who is beneath us and beside us now goes *before* us to lead us to safety. We need His guidance, because sheep don’t always know what is good for them. They aren’t careful about the way they go. They need a shepherd to guide them safely, especially in the terrain that is rocky, dangerous, filled with pitfalls. That is what this world is. It is a dangerous place. The paths that we often choose to travel are not safe. The choices we make often lead us into pain and

trouble. But the Shepherd calls us to follow Him. As we listen to His voice He leads us in the paths of righteousness. Those paths are safe routes. He takes us from the empty teachings and philosophies of men to the comfort we have in the Saviour who has done everything for us. He leads us away from the sinful things to the righteous things that the Spirit works in our hearts.

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.*

- This psalm has often comforted people in times of great distress and especially in the face of death. There is something so comforting about the fact that even in that darkest moment of our life, the Lord goes with us. More than that, He has already travelled this path. He, who did not have to die, has faced the terrible reality of death for us. The Shepherd gives Himself for the sheep. But He has also destroyed the power of death as He rises again from the dead. How wonderful are His words to us: ***I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.*** (John 10:11,18 - ESV). And we are sure that the Lord lives. Paul assures us: ***But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*** (1 Corinthians 15:20 - ESV)
- That dark valley is a perfect place for the devil to abide and work. Peter says ***your adversary, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*** (1 Peter 5:8 - ESV) As the devil works to take us from the hope and life we have in Christ, our Shepherd is there to defend us with the rod and staff of His Word. Luther says in the hymn, *A Mighty Fortress* that one little word can fell the devil, yet that powerful Word of the Lord sustains and strengthens us. With the staff of His Word the shepherd disciplines us, as the Word points out our sin. But His Rod delivers us, as the Word of the crucified and Risen Lord overcomes the works of the devil. This is why we are comforted in the Shepherd's presence.

5. *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

- The imagery shifts, as the Lord who is beneath, beside and before us does something wonderful. We are no longer sheep, but members of His household, for He delivers us from our enemies of sin, death and the devil. The anointing with oil shows that we are honoured guests at His table. Our cup overflows with the blessings He provides for us.
- The table, of course, is the Lord's Table. The life-giving food that He gives is His very body and blood. The Shepherd truly gives His all to His sheep.

6. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

- Here we see two more ways in which the Shepherd surrounds us with His love. He is beneath us, beside us, before us. Here He is *behind* us, as His goodness and mercy follow us through each and every day of our life. In our weakness we wander from the Shepherd. We fall into the temptations that sin brings. We think we can travel on our own without Him. But the Shepherd does not desert us. Another psalmist says: ***Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!*** (Psalm 118:1 - ESV) That mercy is made known as Jesus tells us: ***For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*** (Luke 19:10 - ESV)
- He is also *beyond* us, as He reminds us: ***I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*** (John 14:2-3 - ESV) Through the Shepherd's loving sacrifice, His gentle and loving discipline and through the food He provides, He will bring us safely home. How blessed we are to know that He will never leave us, and that no matter what this world may bring, we will be with Him forever.

A Sunday school teacher decided to have her young class memorize these old, beloved words of Psalm 23 and recite them before the congregation. She gave the youngsters a month to learn the six verses. Little Bobby was excited about the task, but he just couldn't remember the Psalm. After much practice, he could barely get past the first line. On Sunday in front of the congregation, Bobby was very nervous. When it was his turn, he stepped up to the microphone and said proudly "The Lord is my shepherd and that's all I need to know!"

While there is so much more we can and should memorize from God's Word, little Bobby is right: "The Lord is my shepherd and that's all I need to know!" When we know the Shepherd—and that doesn't simply mean knowing who is the shepherd, but knowing Him as our Shepherd, as our Saviour and Lord—then we know all we need. We know that our loving God is with us. We know that the Saviour, who died and rose for us continues to guide us through life, even in the face of death, and into the glory of His eternal home. We know He feeds us with His word and with His own body and blood, given for us on that cross. The Lord is our Shepherd. We are surrounded by the Shepherd's care. And confident of His help, His grace and His mercy, we boldly confess: ***Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*** Amen.