

The LORD Is My Shepherd

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text for this Good Shepherd Sunday is from the Introit, the 23rd Psalm. **The LORD is my shepherd.** Here ends our text.

In our Psalm today we get a picture of a shepherd and his sheep. Psalm 23 was written by King David, who as a youth, grew up being a shepherd tending sheep. Now being a shepherd isn't a popular occupation today. Some of us grew up on farms years ago and remember what sheep are like. But most of us only see sheep if we attend the county fair. We see them corralled in stalls, and we love to pat their heads and feel their soft wool. But few to none of us know what sheep are really like nor what it takes to be a shepherd.

In his book *A Shepherd Looks at the Twenty-third Psalm*," Philip Keller describes what sheep are really like. He says that sheep require more attention than any other livestock. They just can't take care of themselves. Unless their shepherd makes them move on, sheep will actually ruin a pasture, eating every blade of grass, until finally a fertile pasture is nothing but barren soil. Sheep are near-sighted and very stubborn, but easily frightened. An entire flock can be stampeded by a jack rabbit. They have little means of defense. They're timid, feeble creatures. If no shepherd is there to protect them, their only recourse is to run. Sheep have no homing instincts. A dog, horse, cat, or bird can find its way home, but when a sheep gets lost, it's a goner unless someone rescues it. So, the over-riding principle is that sheep can't make it without a shepherd. They're helpless on their own.

Even as a boy, David knew this. You've got to keep the sheep moving. You've got to lead them to fresh pastures everyday so they can eat. A shepherd can't herd his sheep down a steep bank with a fast-flowing river and rapids in order to drink. They'll lose their balance and fall in and drown. No, a shepherd must lead them to quiet and still waters beside a shallow bank. A shepherd must lead his sheep and provide for them. He must be present with them. Even when David's entire household, his father and all his other brothers, were gathered with Samuel so he could anoint the next king, where was David? Out tending the sheep. Someone had to stay with the sheep all the time. David momentarily comes in from the field to be anointed by Samuel, but immediately the future king of Israel returns to be with the sheep. If he doesn't, they'll wander off and get lost. A predator will come and devour them. David told King Saul, "When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it." A shepherd protects his sheep. He uses his rod as a club, as a weapon of protection, but his staff as a way to pull down tender branches for food or hook a lost sheep out of a ravine. Yes, David knew sheep and what it took to be a shepherd.

Of course, being a shepherd was good training for David later in life. As a father, he had many children to care and provide for. As a king, he had to shepherd his people, lead them and fight their battles. He slew Goliath and defeated their enemies, the Philistines. In the Old Testament, David was known as the greatest king of Israel, the greatest shepherd of God's people.

But though David was a great shepherd, he wasn't always a good shepherd. David struggled with his own household, too many wives and too many sibling rivalries. David was often too busy with the affairs of state to be present with his own children. He didn't notice when they went astray, got hurt, or sought revenge. David wasn't there with the rod to discipline, nor the staff to nourish and rescue. One of his sons committed incest with his daughter. Another son rebelled against him. And one spring when David should have been off to war, leading his people in battle as their king, he hung around the palace and got bored. Even though David had many sheep himself, he saw another man's lone sheep and wanted her for himself. David committed adultery with Bathsheba, lied about it, and then murdered her husband Uriah. David killed one of his own soldiers, one of his own sheep. Later in his life, David was tempted by the devil to count all his fighting men. In pride David wanted to know just how many sheep he owned. No, David wasn't always a good shepherd.

I'm sure there were times when David felt more like a forsaken sheep than a shepherd. He had to flee from Saul's jealousy. He couldn't go home. His son rebelled against him. Had to even flee his throne and palace. The devil tempted him. His own sinful nature coveted and lusted after forbidden fruit. In the midst of his failures, shepherding his own family and the people of his kingdom, I'm sure David wondered, "I'm always taking care of someone else, but who takes care of me? I'm always shepherding others, but I need a shepherd myself. Who is my shepherd?"

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Perhaps you've experienced the same thing as David. I'm busy shepherding sheep. I've got these kids to raise. They need sustenance and shelter, education and discipline. They're always wandering off and getting in danger. Can't leave them alone for a moment. They're just so helpless. Or I'm an employer. I've got these employees to manage. Have to find work for them. Got to provide a paycheck and health insurance for them so they can take care of their families. I've got to lead them. I'm an officer at church. I've got responsibilities. God's people need things done for them. They need direction. I'm the pastor. Parishioners are sick. They wander off. The devil seeks to devour them. They need the nourishment of God's word, and I'm their shepherd. Each of us are shepherds of others in one way or another.

But try as we might, we're not always good shepherds. We fail as parents, as employers, as church workers, and pastors. We sin in the vocations and stations in life where God has placed us to care for others. We ourselves are like sheep, though we don't want to admit it. We're stubborn and near-sighted, easily frightened, with little sense of direction and little means of defense. We wander off and get lost. We're helpless on our own. We can't make it without a shepherd. Maybe you've wondered like David, "I'm always taking care of someone else, but who takes care of me? I'm always shepherding others, but I need a shepherd myself. Who is my shepherd?"

In our Psalm today, David answers that question. He turns to God's promises in Holy Scripture. He looks back at the evidence of God's presence and provision and protection in his life. "Who is my shepherd?" Speaking through the Holy Spirit, David answers, "The LORD is my shepherd." And the LORD is your shepherd too.

Because the LORD is your shepherd, you shall not want. The LORD will provide for your needs, both physically and spiritually. The LORD makes you lie down in green pastures and leads you beside still waters. You don't eat dirt and lie down in the mud or fall into raging rapids trying to quench your thirst. The LORD provides what you need, food, shelter, clothing, everything you need to support this body and life. But he also provides for your spirit. He restores your soul. How? He nourishes you with his Word. He feeds you with his body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. He leads you in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake, for Jesus' sake. The LORD leads you in the paths of righteousness when he gives you the righteousness of Jesus Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life. The Lord your shepherd provides for your body and soul. You shall not want.

Because the LORD is your shepherd, he is present with you and protects you. The LORD is no hired hand who clocks in and out or takes coffee breaks and holidays. He is present with you always. He's present with you in good times but especially in difficult times. He's present with you in times of suffering and pain. He's present with you when the devil and the world tempt you. He's present with you through your whole life, even on your deathbed. And because he's present, he's certainly there to protect you. With the LORD's presence and under his protection, you have no fears. "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." His rod and staff comfort you because with his rod Jesus clubbed the head of the devil. On the cross Jesus defeated that lion the devil who sought to accuse you and devour you. By his resurrection from the grave, Jesus hooked you with his staff from the mouth of death and rescued you. His rod may discipline you when you wander, but that too is a sign of his presence and protection. He keeps you from wandering off and out of danger. You have no fears but find comfort in the presence and protection of the LORD your shepherd.

And because the LORD is your shepherd, his provision for you will never end. His presence and protection of you will last forever. The LORD has a plan for you today, and tomorrow, and the day after that, even for all eternity. In spite of your enemies, sin, death, and the devil, the LORD is preparing a place for you now in heaven – a mansion for you, a table for you – where you will be healed of all infirmities and dwell with him forever. "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."

Who is our shepherd? Our Lord Jesus Christ is our shepherd. He's the greatest shepherd of all time, but he's also the good shepherd. He leads us, feeds us, protects us, defends us, and heals us. He's present with us now and to all eternity. He calls you and knows you by name. Who is my shepherd? The LORD is my shepherd. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.