

Quite a few years ago, I took a college course in which I had to write a paper about my favorite poet. When I first got that assignment I was somewhat confused, because I didn't think I knew very many poets. Poetry just wasn't the kind of literature I was used to reading or hearing, or so I thought. What I didn't realize is that in this life we are surrounded by poetry.

Every time we receive a greeting card, it usually contains a few lines of poetry. The lyrics of a lot of the songs we listen to are really poetry put to music. Even the Bible contains poetry. The Song of Songs, portions of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ecclesiastes, and Job all contain poetry. One of the most well known books of poetry in the Bible is the book of Psalms. Many of these poems were put to music and used in the Old Testament worship services.

Today we want to take a look at a beautiful piece of poetry found in the Psalms. It's a favorite of many and paints a beautiful picture of God's love for His people. On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we wish to meditate on the words of Psalm 23:

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.

The opening words of this psalm, **“The Lord is My Shepherd,”** is a fitting theme for our sermon. As my Shepherd, **“The Lord Provides for Me,” “He Protects Me,”** and **“He Gives Me Rest.”**

I. David was very familiar with the life of a shepherd because he had lived this life for a while. He understood the role of the shepherd and also how sheep needed constant care and so he thought this would be a good picture of how God takes care of us, his people. You see, sheep, if left to themselves, will wander aimlessly and eventually die or be killed by predators. A Shepherd prevents this from happening. He provides for his sheep by protecting them, calming them with his voice, and when one wanders off, he looks for that lost sheep until it is found.

Whether we want to admit it or not, we are a lot like sheep and we need a shepherd because we need God's protection, we need his voice calms us and when we are foolish and wander off he seeks us and calls out to us. That's why David wants us to know that we have a shepherd – a personal shepherd. That is why we, like David, can say, **“The Lord is My Shepherd.”** God has called me to faith – he has called you to faith – and he knows each one of us personally. God pays attention to each one of us individually and because we have a personal shepherd, a Good Shepherd, we look to him for all that we need.

Our Good Shepherd doesn't let us down. He provides for us physically and spiritually. We all have food to eat, clothes to wear, a place to live, and usually quite a bit more. The Holy Spirit has worked through the Word and the water of Baptism to bring us to faith and continues to feed

us spiritually through God's Word. The words of our first verse, **"I shall not want,"** remind us of how the Lord provides – not necessarily by making us all materially rich but by giving us different gifts and abilities and helping us to be content no matter what our situation might be.

The way of the world we live in fights against the contentment God wants us to have. There is always pressure to see how much wealth and power one can amass. To be of the world, is to be without God's Word, is to be ever seeking after contentment and peace, but never finding it. Those of the world are always wanting; never satisfied.

We can be satisfied as we focus on the Lord, our Shepherd. That's how faith changes us and why we are thankful that our Good Shepherd restored our soul. Our souls were once lost, but our Good Shepherd has turned them back to life; back to the way of righteousness. Our Good Shepherd does all this for us because we were dead in our sins. We were unable to save ourselves spiritually and so our Good Shepherd comes to us and restores our souls through His Word and He continues to guide us along the path of righteousness. He continues to guide us to lead a holy life. A life where we show our love for our Good Shepherd by obeying His Word.

Our Good Shepherd leads us on the path of righteousness by bringing us to green pastures and leading us beside still waters. These are the truths of the Gospel which give spiritual life and peace to our souls. Green pastures are lush and provide all that we need to feed our soul and to find rest. Jesus tells us in the gospel of Matthew, **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."** God's Word feeds us spiritually and strengthens our faith so that we know the true rest found in the forgiveness of sins. Our Good Shepherd leads us by still waters. Still waters are also deep, not easily churned up by the wind of strife or the hurricanes of distress. God's Word brings us the peace of those still waters.

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, provides all that we need in life, but sometimes, like foolish sheep we wander away – we ignore the blessings of our Good Shepherd and think we can do better someplace else. But Jesus, as our Good Shepherd, reaches out to us through his Word and tries to pull us back onto that path of righteousness – bringing us forgiveness for straying and helping us to find true peace that only he can provide.

II. Our Good Shepherd provides for us in many ways, not only by giving us all that we need physically and spiritually, but also by protecting us. The words of our Psalm tell us, **"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."** Our Good Shepherd sustains our soul with His Word. As we walk through life, we make steady progress toward our goal of eternal life in heaven with our Good Shepherd, but He never promised our life on earth would be perfect after we came to faith.

As we read the words of David, take note that we are walking *through* the valley and not staying *in* the valley. There are burdens that we will bear in this life, but we can take comfort in the fact that they will pass. They are just part of our journey as we walk toward our final rest in heaven.

This valley that we are walking through, David calls **"The Valley of the Shadow of Death."** When Jesus died on the cross for our sins, he removed the sting of death. It is only a shadow. We have no reason to fear a shadow, it has no substance. It can't stop us, it can't block our way. And with any shadow you have to have a light. Jesus is the light of our salvation, the light that leads us to eternal joy in heaven and gets rid of those dark shadows of strife and trouble.

David, as he wrote this psalm wanted to assure us that Jesus, our Good Shepherd is here to protect us as well. That is why he referred to a rod and staff. Shepherds used a rod to fight off wild animals and predators. It was their weapon. Our Good Shepherd has a powerful weapon also. His rod and his staff are God's Word. When Jesus was tempted in the desert, He used God's Word to defeat the devil. As we are tempted, we also turn to God's Word to resist those temptations and to defeat the devil. God's Word is not only a powerful weapon against Satan, but it is also a staff, that guides us in the way of righteousness. It guides us to live a God pleasing life. When we are tempted to stray, it turns us back onto the right path. With our Good Shepherd watching over us, we have nothing to fear.

As we get towards the end of the Psalm, David changes the picture for us, **"He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. He anoints my head with oil, my cup overflows."** Just as a king provides protection for his people, even when surrounded by enemies, so our Good Shepherd provides protection for us, His sheep. God's Word is the "wall" that protects us from our enemies just as the city walls protected the people of King David. God protects us because we are special to Him. He treats us as royal guests who have been anointed with oil by the king. Our Good Shepherd loves us, even to the point of giving His life for our sins. We have no reason to fear with Jesus as our Good Shepherd and King, because He can truly bring us peace and comfort, He can truly bring us rest.

III. David summarizes all these thoughts with the last verse of our psalm, **"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."** God's goodness supplies all of our needs. God's love sent Jesus our Savior to pay for all of our sins on the cross. God's love brought us to faith in Jesus our Savior. Faith brings us the peace and contentment that can only be found in God's Word. Through faith, we have become God's Children and as His children, we have inherited eternal life in heaven. It is there, in heaven, that we will dwell all the days of our lives. It doesn't get any better than that.

Poetry is all around us. If you are ever asked, "Who is your favorite poet?" Remember the beautiful picture of God's love which David has painted for us in the words of Psalm 23. The Lord is My Shepherd, I shall not be in want. May Jesus, Our Good Shepherd, take care of all of our needs, watch over us and bring us true spiritual rest today and always. Amen.