

PSALM 23 (NIV)

- ¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
³ he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
⁴ Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
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 your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.



The LORD Is My Shepherd

1. He provides.
 2. He protects.
 3. He preserves.
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PICTURE THE LORD AS YOUR SHEPHERD

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and we are the sheep. It's a common and comforting image from scripture. But somehow, I don't think it carries the same emotional impact for us as it did back in Bible times. I've never met an Israelite shepherd. In America, you put up a fence, let sheep graze.

In ancient Israel, they don't have meadows of rolling greenery. Sheep need to be moved from one rocky hill to the next, eating up the little sprigs of grass that sprout between stones. They're always on the move and always in danger. And if hunger doesn't get them, and they don't fall off a cliff, hungry predators are waiting to eat them up. Their only hope is a shepherd, who spends every moment providing for and protecting and preserving his sheep.

Can you picture a good shepherd? Sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, always armed, leaning on his staff, looking over his sheep who depend on him for everything.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD PROVIDES

Got the picture? Now hear this: **"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul."** The Good Shepherd provides all we need. Remember when we learned about creation, and you memorized how you believe in God, the Father creator of heaven and earth? And the creator of houses, and clothing, and chicken wings. Remember how God still provides clothing and shoes, house, and home, and all I need.

But the Good Shepherd gives more than physical gifts. He refreshes my soul. You've learned about how every human, including you and I, is born with terrible evil in our souls. We cannot, by our own thinking or choosing, believe in Jesus Christ or come to him. But what has your Good Shepherd done? The Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel! The good news "Jesus died on the cross to pay for your evil" — that is like a drink of refreshing water for your soul.

That's what a shepherd does for you. So can you picture your shepherd? What does he look like? You know, maybe you don't have to use your imagination. Just look around you. Your Good Shepherd provides food and drink, house and home, through the hearts, the hands, and the hugs of the people who are in your pew. Can you picture the face of the person God used to take care of you? Confirmands, a lot of people are going to give you hugs and congratulations today, and if you don't know what to say back, thank them for being one of God's shepherds for you.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD PROTECTS

But a shepherd doesn't only provide. He also protects. **⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.** Maybe you know an older version, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" — same thing. The darkest valleys are the deadliest for sheep. That's where predators hide, and that's where the shepherd becomes essential.

Did you notice at the beginning of the psalm you were telling everyone about your shepherd, "The LORD is my shepherd..." But here, when there are scary times, you stop talking about the Lord, and you talk right to him—as if you and Jesus are the only two people in the world. **"You are with me."** Faith gets real personal when you're in the darkest valley.

When you get sick, it's good to be close to the person who designed the human body. When you have to say goodbye to someone you love, it's good to be with the one who promises that nothing—not even death—can prevent your reunion. When you're close to the Good Shepherd, then and only then can you say, "I will not fear."

The Lord protects you by sending police, firefighters, and doctors. God will spare you from lots of danger, but not all of it. When you do face tragedy, God shepherds you through Christian pastors and family, and friends. They remind you that you can say, "Jesus, you are with me." That's how a Good Shepherd protects you.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD PRESERVES

Finally, the Good Shepherd has promised to preserve you. ⁵ **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.** ⁶ **Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

Doesn't that sound— to go to God's house, and get free food, even when enemies are around, to have a cup that overflows with your favorite drink? Someday that will be our life in heaven. But until then, the Good Shepherd preserves you by chasing you. That's what it means, "goodness and love will chase after me all the days of my life." And you'll need God to chase you.

Did you know that statistically, more than half of you confirmands are likely to leave the church someday? And it seems like, when young confirmands wander away from church, they think about leavening behind the little things—I don't like the music, I don't find it interesting, it's at an inconvenient time. But I want you to think about this one big thing—you're in danger of wandering away from your Good Shepherd—the person who gave you all your abilities; the one who invented chicken, and chocolate, and clothes and friendship. If that wasn't enough, God entered into this world, felt the pain we feel, took on our sins, and laid down his life for us sheep. That's God. You know him, and he knows you. He wants to meet up with you every week right here, and half of the people who put on white robes and made their confirmation promises half of them don't care to know him. Do you know what happens to sheep who wander away from their shepherd? They get devoured by the dangers out there in the world. That's how confirmands who make such solid statements of faith, like this year's have done, end up losing faith and headed for hell. Confirmands, if you're feeling a little fear and pressure right now, that's because you're about to enter a scary part of your life.

And so are you, parents. Do you know the number one predictor of which confirmands will stay connected to church? It's not kids who have

the best answers at examination. It's not kids with the best grades. It's if dad and mom both come to church. When dads stay with the Good Shepherd, so do their sons and daughters. Dads, you're probably feeling some pressure now too. And if Mom isn't coming to church, it's even riskier.

That's pretty scary! But do you know how the Shepherd feels about wandering sheep? Pastor Priewe tells a great story about an Israeli shepherd he met who found a lost sheep and just walloped the little critter to punish it. So many people are afraid that God's going to whoop them for the bad things they've done. But not your Good Shepherd. The psalm says, **"Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life."** Jesus will chase after you, but not with his fist. The goodness and love of God follow you every day. Maybe you haven't been in church super regularly or watching online—it's been extra tricky with COVID. Hear this: No matter how long it's been or no matter what you've done, no matter who you are, Jesus is always waiting with open arms—because he is a Good Shepherd.

That's why your church family is going to chase after you if you start to wander off. We've got a whole team of people whose job is to show you God's love. Only God's love can preserve you in faith.

Your Good Shepherd and your church family are going to chase you with love and goodness. If you're here every week, we're coming after you with God's love. If you skip a few weeks, we're coming after you with God's love. Jesus is going to love and love and love until you and I finally dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

JESUS IS OUR GOOD SHEPHERD

Can you picture Jesus, sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, and *always* armed—all for you. That's the shepherd we're lining up to follow today. You ready?

Amen.