

## **“Our Good Shepherd Keeps Us – He is FOR Us”**

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### **A Psalm of David.**

<sup>1</sup> *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

<sup>2</sup> *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

*He leads me beside still waters.*

<sup>3</sup> *He restores my soul.*

*He leads me in paths of righteousness*

*for his name's sake.*

<sup>4</sup> *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.*

<sup>5</sup> *You prepare a table before me*

*in the presence of my enemies;*

*you anoint my head with oil;*

*my cup overflows.*

<sup>6</sup> *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me*

*all the days of my life,*

*and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord*

*forever.*

### **Are you afraid? Anxious? What scares or worries you?**

When I was a kid, I used to watch creepy horror movies. I was the youngest of four children, and I thought it made me more mature and tougher to watch these scare films. What I didn't tell anyone is that they gave me terrible nightmares, and I would wake up in the middle of night afraid to fall asleep again because of the bad guys chasing me in my dreams.

These days, it's not horror movie bad guys keeping me awake at night, but I still have fears and anxieties. What makes you afraid? What worries you? What wakes you up in the middle of the night and keeps you from going back to sleep.

Sometimes, we're stressed about things other people are doing to us or perhaps things the culture is doing to our kids or grandkids. Sometimes, we're anxious about circumstances beyond our control. Sometimes, we're deeply ashamed and even afraid because of our own behavior – things we've done or said or thought that scare us.

David certainly knew all kinds of fear and anxiety in his life. He was unjustly hunted down by enemies who wanted him eliminated, though he had not done any wrong to them. He dealt with conflict in his household and has deep anxiety for his children. He lived for years with uncertainty, never knowing what was coming next. He also committed horrific sins and must've been kept awake at night at times by the evil in his own heart.

## **I. The Valley & the Evil**

Today, we're focusing our attention on the middle of Psalm 23:

*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.*

We are considering the wonderful truth that Our Good Shepherd Keeps Us: He is FOR Us.

The LORD is always keeping us, just as surely as He is always leading us and always feeding us. He is keeping watch over us when He makes us lie down in green pastures. He keeps us safe while He prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies. But we are most aware of our need for His keeping in the valley of the shadow of death.

In John Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress, the Valley of the Shadow of Death is the most terrifying place. It is completely dark, the path is very narrow, a deep ditch lies on the right side, and an inescapable quagmire is on the left side. Demons and horrible creatures of hell come up out of the ditch and terrify Christian as he walks. It is too dark to see, so he is unable to read his Bible. All he can do is pray and keep walking.

Just as he is entering the valley, two men come running out, terrified and fleeing back from the way to heaven in fear. This is a reminder to us that, in

the Valley of the Shadow of Death, fear is as great a danger as the things which threaten us. Fear may cause us to act foolishly in the face of danger.

But, our fear is not without cause, because the evil in the Valley of the Shadow of Death is real and dangerous. Evil outside of us comes against us from the world and from the devil. The world tempts and pressures us to shrink back from following Jesus. The devil plants seeds of doubt in our minds and hearts, making dark accusations against the character of God. But the worst evil is not outside of us. From our own hearts, the evil of doubt, unbelief, selfishness, covetousness, and a hundred others threaten to lead us far away from our Good Shepherd.

Our Good Shepherd leads us lovingly through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. His presence with us frees us from the paralyzing fear of evil, as He gives us comfort with His rod and staff. The rod and the staff are the Shepherds two main tools against the evil threats of the Valley. His rod strikes our enemies and His staff guides, restrains, and corrects us.

## **II. The Comfort of our Shepherd's Rod**

We do face real enemies in this life. Some of them we fear, and we seek the Good Shepherd's protection when they attack. But some of our deadliest enemies are pretending to be our friends, and we don't fear them or actively seek the Shepherd's protection from them. Classically, the Bible teaches us about three main enemies we face in our spiritual lives – the world, our flesh, and the devil.

What do we mean when we say the world is our enemy? Does that mean that mountains and trees and birds are out to get us? Do we need to fear killer rabbits when we step out our front door? No. When the Bible speaks of "the world," it doesn't mean creations, it means humanity organized in rebellion against God.

Are you ever bothered by the fact that our culture seems to be so hostile to the Christian faith? Well, while the moral standards of our culture have definitely deteriorated greatly over the past few decades, the truth is that the world has always been hostile to Biblically faithful Christianity.

The world is driven by three core principles, as outlined in 1 John 2:15-17: "*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love*

*of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”* The world runs on these three basic driving principles: the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life. The world is our enemy because these principles all draw us away from God and seek to enslave and destroy us. But we need to be warned not to love the world because the principles in the world are also in our sinful nature.

Here's where we need to be clear and understand the real danger we face in this world. The real danger is not that the world might hate us or persecute us. Jesus said they would:

*18 “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. 21 But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. – John 15:18-21, ESV*

In fact, Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:12, *“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”* We should not be shocked or dismayed when the world hates us.

The Apostle Peter writes, *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”* (4:12-14)

Jesus, Paul, and Peter all have something in common: They were all killed by the world because of their love for God and their faithfulness to His calling on their lives. And yet, God kept them all. Jesus was raised again from the dead in glory on the third day, and Paul and Peter were welcomed into their heavenly reward.

The vital issue is not whether or not the world is going to hate, persecute, and attack us. The vital issue is whether or not the world is going to either entice or intimidate us away from following our Good Shepherd. That's the real danger, and the world can use peer pressure, intimidation tactics, or enticing temptations to draw our hearts away from Jesus.

The world is not the only enemy who attacks us, of course. Lurking behind the world's attacks is the prince of this world, the prince of the power of the air, the god of this age, the enemy of our souls.

In 1 Peter 5:6-11, Peter tells us, *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”*

Our enemy has been defeated, but he still is on the prowl looking to pick off those who wander from the flock and away from the Good Shepherd. He uses the world to entice us or intimidate us, tempting us or threatening us. We need to recognize the tactics of our enemies, and we need to stay close to the Good Shepherd and call upon Him for help when we're being attacked. How do we know when the world or the devil are attacking?

Well, Satan's temptations to entice us away from Christ line up with the world's way of operating:

1. The Lust of the Flesh – desires, appetites – gluttony, lust, laziness
2. The Lust of the Eyes – covetousness, materialism, envy
3. The Pride of Life – selfish boasting in who we are, what we have, or what we have done – And be careful here, because self-righteousness can parade itself like religious virtue when it's really the Pride of Life.

When we're being ruled by our appetites, driven by materialism or covetousness, or we're seeking to make a name for ourselves – to be great or show others how great we are – we are dancing to Satan's tune, keeping in

step with the world. That's not the voice of our Good Shepherd. He calls us to humility, contentment, gratitude, faithfulness, and joy in the Lord.

Our Good Shepherd is never far away with His rod. He will deliver us when we cry out to Him. That gives us comfort.

### **III. The Comfort of Our Shepherd's Staff**

The comfort of our Good Shepherd also comes from His staff. This is the longer pole, often with a crook at the end. Shepherds used rods to beat off the enemies of the sheep, but they used the staff to correct straying sheep. So, the rod protects, while the staff corrects.

If a sheep is responsive to the shepherd's voice, he doesn't need to use the staff. If the sheep is responsive to a gentle tap from the staff as a reminder, the shepherd doesn't need to do any more than that. But if a sheep wanders off and is in danger, the crook at the end of the staff can slip around the sheep's neck and pull it back – and that is not a comfortable or easy experience for the sheep.

Jesus loves us too much to let us be complacent with our sin, to let us wander away without correcting us. He comes with His Word first, and if we respond to His word, good. That's listening to His voice. If we ignore His word, He will tap us with the correcting staff. Often that leads to letting us see the consequences of our sin, to see how we've wandered and are in danger. But if we don't respond to the tap, He will send severe hardship to get our attention, to turn us back to Himself.

Now, that doesn't mean that every time something very hard comes into our lives, it's necessarily because we've been stubborn and disobedient. We can't always know why the Lord is doing what He's doing. But pain and trials are always an invitation for us to draw close to the Good Shepherd.

For the shepherd's staff to comfort us, we need to see that it's wielded by a loving Good Shepherd who always wants what is best for us. And we need to be responsive to His corrections. When God's word comes to us in correction and it confronts us in an area of sin, we need to make sure we're not hardening our hearts. We need to be in the Word regularly, humbly, prayerfully. And when painful things come into our lives, we need to seek the

Lord in prayer that is also humble, honest, confessing sin and giving thanks to the Good Shepherd.

## **Will you trust your Good Shepherd?**

When Christian was in the Valley of the Shadow of Death in Pilgrims Progress, he had to rely on prayer. Sometimes, we're in such deep pain or confusion that we read the Bible and it just doesn't seem to be speaking to us, to be helping us. We must turn to the Lord in prayer.

But how do we pray? What is true, God-honoring, Shepherd-following prayer?

Well, the Westminster Shorter Catechism has help for us here:

Q. 98: What is prayer?

***Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of His mercies.***

So, first "an offering up of our desires" means that prayer must be honest, sincere, from the heart. We can't fake God out in prayer. He wants our hearts.

Secondly, "for things agreeable to His will" means that prayer must be humble and submissive. He is the Good Shepherd; we are sheep. He is the King; we are His kingdom. He is the Savior; we are the sinners who need saving.

Third, "in the name of Christ," means that we pray only through the intercession of Jesus on our behalf and in keeping with what we know of His character.

Fourth, "with confession of our sins," means that we are humbly and honestly confessing all known sin and asking for forgiveness and deliverance.

And finally, "thankful acknowledgement of His mercies" means that we are grateful for all the good God has shown us that we don't deserve.

So, we must pray in an honest, submissive, Christ-centered, humble, repentant, and thankful way.

Prayer like this shows that we trust our Good Shepherd. We're not arrogantly

making demands or assuming we know better than He does. We are humbly submitting ourselves to His leading, His feeding, and His keeping.

We have a very good Shepherd. He loves us so much He laid down His life for us. He never leaves us nor forsakes us.

We have a very wise Shepherd. He knows the right paths to lead us on. He knows what food our souls need, as He feeds us with Himself through His word and His table.

We have a very strong Shepherd. He knows how to guard us from enemies and correct us from straying. When we do stray, He leaves the 99 to pursue us and bring us back. Even if that's painful for us, He knows we need it, and it's good for us in the long term.

So, will we trust Him? Will we trust His love and wisdom and strength? Will we follow closely, listening for His voice and calling on Him?