

## **THE GOOD SHEPHERD** (Wednesday Online Talk, May 6, 2020)

In this 4<sup>th</sup> week of Easter, we focus on the image of the Lord as our shepherd. Psalm 23 is the text, so if you can, I encourage you to pause the video right now, get your bible out and turn to Psalm 23 and follow along. So let's begin: Psalm 23 is a love song to God. How blessed are we, just to be able to say, [1] "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want." As you and I are getting pulled in ten different directions every day by all the things we have to do, tending to our families, fulfilling obligations at work, answering to all the people in our lives who have a claim on us: into the middle of all this, the Shepherd has come. / What a beautiful gift. The shepherd is now calling to us in the middle of all those voices: "come to me!" When Jesus comes into our lives, he doesn't make the background picture any less messy; those other voices are still out there; we still have to meet our obligations at work. But now we can turn to the Shepherd who holds the whole picture in his hands. We can listen to his voice. You want to know what's in your future? Look to Christ. He is the future. Now everything in our lives, however big a mess it may be right now, can be directed towards him. We can give our lives to him. We know our purpose, our mission, our identity in this world. We know who we belong to. What an amazing freedom and focus and clarity he gives us! Just the fact that we know who to turn to in this world.

People put their trust in different shepherds; they promise us life and fulfillment and success. We talk about this consumer culture we live in where we can fill every gap in our lives almost immediately with what we want. Information, entertainment, sound bites. So we just keep packing it in every day. We get bored with one thing, we move on to the next. Then we wonder: why are people so isolated, unhappy, lonely and disconnected from each other? Why are young people having a hard time finding meaning in life? Well, you and I, who follow the Good Shepherd, know that a consumer culture goes against everything God built us to be! God made us in his own image. And he shows us who he is by laying down his life down for us. [2] He emptied himself out for us. And he built us to be like him. We are built to empty ourselves out in loving service to each other. Sin keeps us from being the reflections of God, that God built us to be. / No wonder so many people in the richest nation on earth are unhappy, unfulfilled, hungry for more, always wanting what the neighbors have. We're trying to fill ourselves up by packing it all in and filling all the gaps. But then Jesus comes and empties himself out in love and says "THIS is what total victory looks like." This is what fullness of life looks like. The person who loses his life in this world will find it. That's not just a theological idea. That's the truth Jesus wants you and me to experience every day on our way to total victory. Every day, find ways to lose your life in love and service, and experience that amazing freedom of giving. In Christ, we start every day with everything we need. We have him. So we shall not be in want.

And he makes us lie down in green pastures. [3] What do sheep do in the pasture? They munch on that beautiful grass. What a gift you and I have been given: we know where the best food is. Jesus said, "Human beings shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus is THE word of God. / If we don't have the food that comes from God...that is, the gospel promise he speaks to us and that living relationship with him, the Giver of all life, then no worldly feast is ever going to satisfy us, no matter how hard we work to get it.

The other day I was getting cabin fever pretty bad because of this quarantine, sometimes it can really make you feel pretty helpless; so many things you have to put on hold. So I picked up my phone and started reading scripture. And it struck me: here I am, as a believer, able to feed on the divine Word any time. I have immediate access to the most beautiful green pasture; this spiritual food that fills me up with a sense of challenge and comfort and divine peace and inspiration and faith. And as soon as I start consuming this divine food—the Word of God—I’m no longer a slave to any quarantine. I’m no longer a slave to my personal situation. The word of God lifts me up and frees me to see a bigger world, a bigger life...from God’s eyes. What a beautiful pasture that you and I can lie down in! We can munch on that life-giving food any time, any day.

And those still waters that he leads us by: [4] how blessed we are to have a Shepherd who leads us to the water. The water where we are reborn every day. We have been baptized into Jesus’ death, so that we can rise with him daily into that new identity that God has stamped on us. “You are my own son...you are my own daughter...with whom I am well pleased.” / You are not here in this universe to be a slave to powers beyond your control. You are the Creator’s own spirit-filled son, you are his own powerful, conquering daughter. The storms of life can pass through and wreck everything, we can do all sorts of damage, mess everything up royally, we can be sitting in a deep pit of emotional or physical agony...but always, always, we have direct access to the still waters. The peace that comes from knowing and trusting who we are and who we will always be in God’s eyes. His own children. Our Father has sacrificed everything he has to give you and me that peace...and that promise.

[5] And when I’m walking through the valley of the shadow of death I know who’s walking with me. You notice, Psalm 23 talks about the shadow of death. You know how shadows can be a whole lot bigger than the actual thing casting the shadow. Well that’s how it is with death. / We will all experience the day of death, when we have to let go of everything in this life...no getting around that. But you know, that’s not the worst thing at all. What’s bad is the shadow of death being cast into the valley that we’re walking through right now. The enemy uses that big shadow to mess with us. He plays on our fears. We’ve got plenty of fears for him to play with: We fear losing our spouses, losing our kids to all sorts of things; losing our jobs, our reputations, our money, our security. When fear rules us, all we see is threats and death. We dig in, we protect ourselves, we keep everything to ourselves, we are blind to opportunities, we stay isolated in our trench, waiting for the next evil to befall us. It’s exactly where the enemy wants us.

Well, on Easter God took away the enemy’s most powerful weapon...the fear of death. And he replaces that empty shadow with a new reality...the power of the Holy Spirit. Walking in the Spirit, I will fear no evil. No matter what happens, including death when it happens, the future is mine through Jesus Christ. Christ will take care of all my personal weaknesses and all my shortcomings, and he’ll take care of the big picture, too. We can know that he’s out there with his club and staff, defeating the enemy, defending us. Now I can focus on what I really have power over in this life. True, it’s not much. But I can leave the cosmic battles to God. I can let go of all the stuff over which I have no power. I can take full charge of the little bit that God has placed in my care.

I also have a shepherd [6] who uses the rod and staff of his Word to catch me and get me back on track, when I forget who I am and who I belong to...when I wander off, when I start feeding on garbage. The Word can get me back on track. / But you know where we encounter the power of God's rod and staff often in everyday life? Usually through the people who love us best. Our spouses, family, friends, the coworkers we love, our church family. What a gift it is that God puts "little shepherds" in our lives who love us, who we can trust, who not only remind us of who we are in Christ, but who can gently, lovingly hold us up to the mirror so that we can see ourselves, and understand where we need to correct ourselves. Even when it doesn't feel so good, we can know that that also is God's loving hand.

And finally, praise God [7] we are blessed to have a shepherd who prepares a table for us in the presence of the enemy. He puts his life on the table for us. / You know, all the great seekers of all the great religions search the length and breadth of this earth for the ultimate spiritual experience: union with God. Oneness with the source, the creator. Well, you and I, in a simple meal of bread and wine that Jesus left us, experience the fullness of what every human being is hungering for from the bottom of their souls...communion with God. Sure, we can make it more complicated than eating bread and wine and trusting in what Jesus says it is—so that's why even faith is a gift from God, given to us by the power of his Word. We can open our hearts and believe and trust what Jesus says he's doing with the wine and bread...becoming part of us, and we, becoming active participants in his life. Together as his church we become his body in the world. In Christ, our cup overflows. And in that overflowing of love and life: that's where the Good Shepherd raises up little shepherds. Each one of us going out into the world to shine the light of the One who is so faithful to us, and who loves us best.