

Goodness and mercy be to you all the days of your life. Amen.

Psalm 23:1–4 (NKJV)

- 1** The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- 2** He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.
- 3** He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.
- 4** Yea, 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.

Led in the Ruts of Righteousness

LORD, Sanctify us by your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In the name of Your Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, dear flock of God,

In 1 Samuel chapter 16 we read of how Samuel comes to Jesse of Bethlehem and seeks out a king for Israel among his sons. Where is David the youngest? He is out tending the sheep. Yes, David, who through the Spirit, wrote Psalm 23, grew up a shepherd. He knew the issues one faced when tending to sheep. He knew of the constant attention and careful management a flock of sheep requires. He knew of the stubborn ways that sheep behave, the foolishness that the animal tends to display. He knew the need for a Shepherd to manage and lead the sheep.

In verse 3 he writes, **He leads me in the paths of righteousness.** In the Hebrew, David uses a word which describes a rutted path. He pictures a well worn path from the track of a wheel or, more appropriately, from the herding of sheep. We could literally translate this, “He leads me in the well worn ruts of righteousness.” These are the good paths. These are the paths which lead to green pasture and still water. Your Shepherd knows these paths well. He guards these paths well. He leads you to still water.

1. Your Shepherd knows the good paths

Sheep are creatures of habit. Shepherds will attest to this. Left unchecked they will overgraze, pollute and wear thin the good ground, and cause erosion. Left to struggle for themselves they will create a desert wasteland. Contrary to popular notion, sheep are anything but low maintenance. They require a faithful shepherd who will predetermine a plan and rotation of grazing, watering, and resting. They need a shepherd who knows the good paths.

You can see why the Spirit would choose sheep to describe God's people. Left to ourselves we overgraze, pollute and wear thin the good ground. We cause the good paths to erode and create our own unrighteous ruts.

Just like sheep without a shepherd, we will seek the path of least resistance. That is why it can be so deceptive and dangerous for people to follow their heart. If we are not

led by God's word, our heart can come up with all kinds of reasons why this or that path is right. But ultimately, somewhere down the road it will begin to cause erosion all around. It will trample the good ground. That is why divorce, for instance, can cause so many ruts in the lives of those involved. And by the time it has gotten to that point, it is often too late. The bad ruts have been established. Sinful habits, too, leave us in a dry wasteland. Our brain functions in much the same way as sheep. Our neurological pathways get so familiar with the bad paths – the ruts of anger or bitterness, the ruts of lust, the ruts of earthly greed – that we simply can't get out of these ruts. We can't, that is, without the aid of a shepherd.

Psalm 27:11 (NKJV) — 11 Teach me Your way, O Lord, And lead me in a smooth path, because of my enemies.

Our Shepherd knows the good paths. He has walked them ahead of us. He has forged these righteous ruts by the perfect love He has displayed in your place. He is the Good Shepherd who has laid down His life for the sheep. These are the righteous ruts, the trustworthy paths that our Lord has established. They are trustworthy because they are not being forged by us. They are righteous, because they were worn well by the steps of our Shepherd.

3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.

A Shepherd is not followed by His sheep because they are trying to impress the shepherd, or because they want to gain the Shepherd's favor. No they follow, because they trust. They have faith in His faithfulness. They trust that He will do them no harm, that He will restore them from their wandering ways. And He has. He has restored your soul. **3 For His name's sake.** A Shepherd is only as good a herder as he is trustworthy. "For His name's sake" means that God is leading you on account of who He is. The death and resurrection of His Son, His redemption, His promises are an all encompassing motivation for God's care for your soul. Jesus has faithfully proven every one of God's promises sure. **1 John 3:16 (NKJV) — 16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. For His name's sake you are forgiven. For His name's sake your soul is restored. For His name's sake you receive the robe of Christ's righteousness so that, despite whatever your wandering ways were, you are still one of God's flock.**

1 Peter 2:24–25 (NKJV) — 24 who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness— by whose stripes you were healed. 25 For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Your Shepherd knows the good paths.

2. Your Shepherd guards the good paths

As winter approaches the shepherd must now drive the herd back to the ranch. For several reasons he is not able to take the higher ground and must lead them through the treacherous valley below. At this time of year, the best feed and richest ground is to be found in the valley bed. This means he will face predators that take cover in higher cliffs and rocks. He will face storms that tumble off the steep mountain side and winds that funnel through the lower country. Still the shepherd knows this is the best route. This is the necessary path to keep the herd healthy, well fed, and rested along the journey home. Your Shepherd guards the good paths.

4 Yea, 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.

Do we have reason to trust God? Do we have reason to follow His lead in the ruts He has laid before us? In the midst of darkness, predators, and storms, to what do we cling? **John 10:27–28 (NKJV) — 27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. 28 And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.**

You notice on the night of our Savior's birth in Bethlehem, how the shepherds were faithfully watching over their flocks by night. This is the unending protection of your Shepherd. His rod and staff do not threaten you. They are weapons to fight off the enemy. They are reminders of that He is your Shepherd and not a thief. They may best be thought of as God's Word and Sacrament.

God has recorded His Word for us so that you can hear the voice of your Shepherd speaking. It is fighting off the true predators that can't be seen with our eyes. This is how God guards the good paths. **Jeremiah 6:16 (NKJV) — 16 Thus says the Lord: "Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls.**

In our Gospel reading from John 10, Jesus describes false teachers as hirelings. He describes how these are not the Shepherd, they are just hired hands. When the wolf comes they flee, for they have no real investment in this flock. **John 10:13 (NKJV) — 13 The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.**

The Holy Spirit has employed under shepherds to lead His flock. He has called pastors and teachers and professors to care to the needs of His sheep. We find this describing the work of Moses and Aaron – **Psalms 77:20 (NKJV) — 20 You led Your people like a flock By the hand of Moses and Aaron.** Through Moses and Aaron God was leading Israel like a flock. The Good Shepherd speaks through His under shepherds. The question for you to answer is, "Am I being led by the true shepherds of God or hired hands?" Are these rightly representing the voice of the Good Shepherd or are they falsely speaking their own thoughts and opinions. We read in Ezekiel 34 of the state of these under shepherds in Israel back in the 6th century BC. **Ezekiel 34:2 (NKJV) — 2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to**

them, ‘Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?”

It remains your responsibility to listen to the words of those who teach you God’s Word. Do not just accept these words because I claim to be your pastor. Rather listen and see if you hear the voice of your Good Shepherd. Do not assume that your church or the CLC will never err. Find the righteous ruts of God’s Word. As Paul says, **1 Thessalonians 5:21 (NKJV) — 21 Test all things; hold fast what is good.**

God’s Word remains the true voice of your Good Shepherd, guarding and guiding you through what ever valley the Lord thinks is best. He will fight off the dangers and lead you home.

3. Your Shepherd leads to still waters

He leads you through such dark paths, because He knows something. He knows that in the midst of loss or heartache, in the difficult trudge through storm and wind, He knows that just ahead is still water.

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

One shepherd recounts the story of seeing a flock led toward a magnificent mountain stream. Just up ahead was a cool and clean source of water. Yet on the way several stubborn ewes and their lambs stopped instead to drink from small, dirty, muddy pools beside the trail. The water was polluted. But the sheep were quite sure it was the best drink obtainable.

There are some spiritual shepherds in this world who will allow you to stop at these muddy waters. They teach you to drink in the water of earthly prosperity. They will tell you to seek rest in earthly happiness. They will lead you to a good job and more money. And they will tell you that outwardly righteous living is what will bring this to you. They will suggest that if you aren’t receiving these earthly blessings from God, it is because you aren’t asking hard enough, believing firmly enough, or you aren’t doing enough good.

Water and contentment are essential to the sheep’s rest and health. If the shepherd cannot convince and urge them onward in the ruts of righteousness, past the bad pools, they will never survive. The righteous ruts we find with faith in Jesus do not stop at these muddy pools of polluted water. They lead right past, they lead beyond this world. They are found through a spiritual rest as you meditate and study God’s Word. They lie beyond this body and these material goods we receive.

Matthew 5:6 (NKJV) — 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.

This is your journey home. You find sustenance and contentment in the still water of the gospel. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, **John 4:14 (NKJV) — 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.**”

Your Shepherd promises you will never lack. This is what v.1 means when it says, “I will not want” – meaning, you will not be in want. In fact, the original language is even more emphatic. David says, “I will never want.” “I will never lack at all.”

God will care for His sheep. When He promises you eternal rest, He will be sure to get you there. Just beyond, is green pasture. Just ahead is still water. He is leading you. As God led Israel through the wilderness unto the promised land of Canaan. **Psalm 78:52–54 (NKJV) — 52 But He made His own people go forth like sheep, And guided them in the wilderness like a flock; 53 And He led them on safely, so that they did not fear;**

God is leading you through a wilderness. With His word at your side, He guides, guards, and leads. He never rests, He never tires. ... He knows the good paths ...He guards the good paths ... He leads you to still waters.

Who so happy as I am,
Even now the Shepherd's lamb?
And when my short life is ended,
By His angel host attended,
He shall fold me to His breast,
There within His arms to rest.

Led in ruts of righteousness. Amen.