

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

Where do mothers learn to care for their children so well? Where do females gain “the mothering instinct”? Some girls feel it early. Of all the things they want to do in life, having a baby ranks near the top. Others become women before they feel the mothering instinct. Occasionally you meet a woman for whom mothering is just about the furthest thing from her mind. And that’s ok—God reveals no command that each woman must give birth. But even then God sometimes surprises a woman with a baby, and that’s when the mothering instinct comes out. It’s not that this instinct causes her to know how to do everything for a new baby. There’s a learning curve, right moms? But generally moms want to make sure their baby is well-fed, well-rested, well-bathed, well-diapered, and later on well-educated and well-provided for. God gives this same nurturing instinct to lots of men too. May God have the glory, even on Mother’s Day.

Psalm 23 reveals how good God is at nurturing us. But instead of looking at it from God’s side, the giving side, King David looks at it from the receiving side. And while mothers and fathers and church leaders could learn a lot from God about how to nurture those whom the Lord has placed into our care, this Psalm would rather remind us how good we have it as sheep in the Lord’s flock. Let’s take a closer look at Psalm 23.

“THE LORD *is* MY SHEPHERD; *I shall*

*not be in want.*” I shall lack nothing. Does King David sound boastful? Normally boasting about yourself is wrong, unless it’s time for your annual review and your employer requires you to demonstrate your worth to the business. But, according to the Bible, God wants us to have genuine humility and let others talk about the good we have done. The Bible also teaches us to boast in the Lord. When we brag, let’s brag on the Lord and tell all the good things he has done. Let’s do a little bragging right now. God is great! He sent Jesus to die for us on the cross so that we would not have to pay for our own sins in hell. He raised Jesus from the dead so that we would know we too will rise from death. He brought us to faith in Jesus through baptism and Bible stories. He has given us food and clothing and shelter. He has promised to provide everything we need for life on this earth. He has promised to bring us to his heavenly home. “*The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall lack nothing!*”

“*He makes me lie down in green pastures.*” In order to appreciate this we have to think like sheep. Sheep will not lie down and rest unless they are truly free of fears. The problem is that sheep have so many problems. Sounds like us, doesn’t it? First, sheep will not lie down unless they are full of food, free from the fear of hunger. So into the green pastures the shepherd leads them. But the very best climate for raising sheep is dry climate where green pastures are hard to come by, like in Bible times. Green pastures take a lot of work in a dry climate: the modern

shepherd must plant good seeds, pull the weeds, and bring water to irrigate. The fact that the sheep are lying down in green pastures means that the shepherd has really put himself out for his sheep. They are full and satisfied. +Our Lord has put himself out for us: he has provided the green pastures of his Word for us to fill our spiritual bellies. God's people who do this daily become truly satisfied. They often feel no need to satisfy that inborn, gnawing hunger with food or sex or influence or pampering or purchasing. But then tomorrow becomes today, and our soul wakes up hungry again. So follow Jesus into the green pastures of God's Word each new day. Then step back and watch your soul lie down right there, fully satisfied.

Sheep are just about defenseless, which is too bad because they are also delicious. Lions, dogs, and people think so. The only defense sheep have is to run. Sheep will not lie down unless they cannot see any predators nearby. If sheep are lying down, it's because the shepherd is nearby keeping watch to defend them. +Jesus is always nearby us, keeping watch for that nasty lyin' lion, Satan, who thinks we're delicious and wants to devour us with his lies about what is fun and satisfying. When God's promises make us feel safe from Satan, we will rest because the Good Shepherd is nearby to protect us.

Like humans sheep can sometimes be bullies. Some sheep will go over to other sheep and butt them just because they want to push their own advantage: "I'm

coming through, get out of the way." And then the rest of the flock feels edgy. +If you've been a Christian long enough, you've even seen church people do this. They don't like something, so they come at you loud, or they cut you with soft, sharp words. But guess what: those same bully sheep don't do this when a good shepherd is nearby. He won't put up with that kind of behavior because he knows it destroys peace in the flock, and makes God's sheep edgy. +Jesus is always near to those who spend time in God's Word, helping them overcome the urge to press their advantage in the home and in the church. The Good Shepherd turns bully sheep into 'sheep with the servant attitude.' He frees from all my fears and "*makes me lie down in green pastures.*"

*"He leads me beside quiet waters."* Somehow noisy water scares some sheep. That's probably good, because it's dangerous for sheep to get into deep water. If their wool gets soaked, they could drown. So a good shepherd takes the sheep to pools of clear, clean water, where there are none of the parasites that can trouble sheep terribly. In fact, if the modern shepherd has prepared green pastures for his sheep to feed in, he doesn't need to take them for water very often. The sheep can get enough water from the dew that forms on the lush green grass every morning. Dew is very quiet water. And pure. We cannot drown in the quiet waters of God's Word.

*"He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's*

sake.” Sheep often get themselves into trouble. When their wool gets caught in fences or bushes, they can’t free themselves. They just stand there until a coyote comes along and picks them off. Sound familiar? I wasn’t keeping my gluttony under control last week and gained more weight. I needed the Lord to restore my soul by forgiving me first and then leading me back onto the straight path of a proper diet. \*What appetites do you have? What bushes do you get stuck in? There’s alcohol, work, sports—none of which are wrong unless you get spend too much time in them and neglect the needs of the people you are responsible for, including yourself. There’s worry, laziness, pornography, sex outside of marriage, the drive for acceptance by people. What fence or bush has your wool gotten stuck in lately? +Oh, look! There’s the Lord come to free you from the trap with his words of forgiveness. He knows that, if he frees you from a sin and sets you back on the right path again, others may notice and say, “Hey, I messed up like you did, and I see you’re still going to church. Do you think your Jesus would welcome someone like me too?” “Yes,” we say, “there’s room in our church for every kind of sinner” because the Lord “*restores my soul... for his name’s sake.*”

“*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*” Sounds like we’re back to boasting again, doesn’t it? But this is the right kind of boasting. I will fear none of the

troubles I face in this life. I will not fear losing my job. I will not fear losing my health. I will not fear losing my home. I will not fear losing my family. I will not fear losing my life. There are lots of dark, scary valleys we have to cross in this life. But I will not fear anything that can happen to me in any of them. Why not? “*For you are with me,*” Lord. You are almighty. You created the whole world, including the billions of stars out there in the sky. And yet you know me so well that you know how many hairs I have on my head. Why should I fear? You are with me, Lord.

“*Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*” A shepherd in Bible times had two sticks, one short and one long. The short stick, the rod, was a weapon. It could be swung like a baseball bat, or thrown like a javelin. Most of the shepherds’ rods were heavy on one end so that they would fly like a big arrow. \*Even with all that shepherds had to do in order to feed and protect their flocks, they still had a lot of time on their hands to fill. They had to be near the flock 24/7. To fill up their down time, they would practice throwing their rod or slinging stones. Think of how accurate King David got at slinging stones while he was a shepherd. Middle eastern and African shepherds who still follow the same shepherding techniques as in Bible times, are accurate enough to kill poisonous snakes without hitting nearby sheep or people. So we sheep say to our Good Shepherd, “*Your rod is a comfort to me*”

because you can smack down all those who would harm me. \*But your **staff** is a comfort to me too. Artists have often painted the shepherd's staff with the top end shaped into a hook. But that's not true to reality. The staff in Bible times was just a long stick that the shepherd would use to nudge the sheep away from cliffs and brambles and unsafe plants, the way God uses his Word to nudge us away from showing disrespect or nudges us away from an unforgiving heart. Sometimes a shepherd used his staff to give a sharp wrap to the bully sheep we talked about before. That's a comfort to those being bullied, and to those who get bonked and realize, "Oh, that's right, I'm supposed to love my neighbors, not bully them. Thanks, Lord."

*"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."* The picture changes a little here. Now we are people, sitting down at the table with Jesus. Think of the Lord's Supper, sometimes called the Lord's Table, where Jesus brings us the full forgiveness of sins through his own body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine. Meanwhile sad sack Satan must watch us fill our soul with God's forgiveness.

*"You anoint my head with oil."* Sounds like a bad hair day, right? But in Bible times prophets, priests, and kings were anointed. Jesus has made us his prophets by saying, "Go proclaim the good news in all the world." He has made us his priests, urging us to offer up prayers on

behalf of our neighbors. He has made us kings: through our prayers we rule with him right now as he rules the world on our behalf. We have it good, don't we?

*"My cup overflows."* The Lord puts so many blessings into the cup of our lives that we don't have room enough for them all, and we have to sell them at a garage sale.

*"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life."* Normally we would want the goodness and love of the Lord to be in front of us, where we're going. But this is even better: God's goodness and love are constantly pursuing us from behind. And since God is faster than we, his goodness and love constantly overtake us. Could we have it any better?

*"And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* After our life on earth, we have a life yet to live in God's house above, not because of anything good we have done, but because the Lord is merciful. When our last hour comes, he will send his holy angels to escort our soul to heaven to await the resurrection of our body. Your loved ones who died believing in Jesus are there already. And sooner or later, you will join them. And you'll never endure another earthly problem again. And you'll never fall into sin again. **THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD.** He has supplied all my needs. I will never lack anything.