

PSALM 23 IS PURE GOSPEL

He is going to feed and protect you -- He is going to lead you to heaven.

Psalm 23

TEXT: *A psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

In Jesus' name, my fellow redeemed:

This favorite Psalm of so many is pure Gospel. That means that it speaks only of what God does FOR US, and not what God demands that we must do for him.

When you read the Bible and it tells you what God wants you to do, you are reading LAW. Whenever you read the Bible and it tells you what God HAS DONE and DOES DO FOR YOU, you are reading the Gospel. Gospel means "good news" and when something is done for you and you therefore have nothing that must be done, that is good news. When God says that he has given you Christ's righteousness and has taken away your sins, then you are reading the most powerful good news of all! You are going to go to heaven because Jesus kept the law for you and then took your sins upon his shoulders and paid for them on the cross. Easter Sunday is the joyous demonstration that God has declared you forgiven, justified and righteous for Jesus' sake.

Today we read David's "Shepherd Psalm." It's pure Gospel, assuring us of all that the Lord does for us as he feeds and protects his Church and leads us to heaven.

David writes: *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.* We know these opening words by heart, but let us not forget the words that precede these words: *A psalm of David.* These words also are words inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God breathed into the heart and mind of King David: "Sign your name to this Psalm." So we are assured of its author who himself had been a shepherd. He knew what his sheep needed to live. And so when it is the Lord himself who is our Shepherd, we are assured that God will provide all that we need to live and to survive in this world. We shall not be in want!

Our synod provides an investment opportunity to its pastors and teachers called "The Shepherd Plan." It's one of those "401K" things. Since they set it up for us a few years ago I've been putting something from my monthly paycheck into that plan. My wife also has a "401K" through her employer. Both investment firms keep us informed with monthly statements, and I've noticed that both of our plans seem to follow the success of the stock market. When the stock market goes up, so does my Shepherd Plan. When the stock market goes down, so does my Shepherd Plan. I guess that's how these things work.

Can you imagine the anxiety and fear that would be ours if that's how the Lord, our Good Shepherd operated in taking care of us? Sometimes he is there for us, and sometimes he is far away! Sometimes he is protecting us, and sometimes he is looking the other way! In fact, because we are sinful and weak, helpless and stupid as sheep, it's not uncommon for us to actually think this way about our Lord. We so easily worry, fear, grumble and complain as if we are in want and in need. We do not see the green pasture and quiet waters of which David speaks in this Psalm: *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters...* Do you know why we cannot see them? Do you know why we cannot feel the lush green pastures or the quiet waters? It's because we are sinful by nature.

We need to see some proof that God is with us to feed us and to protect us! So David points to what sheep do see for their personal assurance that the shepherd is with them: *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.* The shepherd's rod and staff are his tools to care for all the needs of his sheep. The poetic imagery of this Psalm can be explained by only one thing: the Gospel. It is the Gospel in Word and Sacrament that God uses to create faith, sustain faith, and to strengthen faith. It is so powerfully revealed by Paul in his letter to the Romans: *Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.* Ro 10 Here are "the rod and staff" of the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 Through the preaching of the Gospel, through

Baptism and the Lord's Supper, through these means alone the Holy Spirit feeds us. Through these means alone, *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.*

That's why this is pure Gospel! It's all about what God has done FOR us through Jesus, God's name's sake. David knows this: *He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.* David knew Jesus before Jesus was born and named Jesus. In another famous Psalm David wrote about a conversation between the Lord Jesus and the Lord God: *The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."* Ps 110 This Lord is David's Shepherd. That's why with confidence David writes: *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.* This life is indeed a deep dark valley. Our enemies are Satan, our own sinning, and sin's consequences, death. These enemies are real. Satan's lies would destroy our faith in God's Word. His tactic is ALWAYS the same because it works: Did God REALLY SAY? Is this sin really so bad that God would damn me to hell? My own sinful nature is always bent on committing sin, or on omitting the good that God wants me to do. And death? Death is the consequence of my sin. Death and dying ruins life in this world.

These enemies were the footstool of Jesus when he announced his victory on the cross: It is finished! Sin is paid for and therefore it is gone! And on Easter Sunday, our Good Shepherd rose from the dead. God has justified mankind!

What is left? What is left for us is to get through life's dark valley to the glory of God's heaven. And to do this, our Lord gives us the Gospel of forgiveness, life and salvation with things we can taste and touch. Jesus has prepared *a table before me in the presence of my enemies.* Right in the face of Satan, sin and death Jesus feeds us bread and wine and his own body and blood, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins. Satan challenges: Did God really say? We declare: Jesus, our Savior and Creator has clearly said: *This is my body! This is my Blood!* I will believe Jesus and disregard Satan on this word.

David declares: *You anoint my head with oil...* By Christ's institution and command, that Old Testament "anointing oil" has been replaced with plain old water. Yet, by God's command, plain old water applied with the promise of God brings with it the Holy Spirit who does what Jesus said Baptism does: *The Spirit gives birth to spirit...* Jn 3 You have been, as Jesus calls it, *Born again!* Jn 3 Right in the face of our enemies, Baptism saves us, even our infant children!

Take that, Satan, sin and death! With the preaching of Christ and the forgiveness of my sins, with the power of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Jesus, our Good Shepherd will lead us to heaven, as David declares: *Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

There's one more thing of which David speaks concerning all who are led by Jesus, the Good Shepherd. David declares: *my cup overflows.* We often hear people speak about the test that differentiates the optimist from the pessimist. You make a glass of water half full and then ask: is the glass half empty or half full? The pessimist will say, "It's half empty." The optimist will always see the glass "half full." But Psalm 23 reminds us of what God has done, still does for his people so that as we are led to heaven, we can only declare: *my cup overflows!* Amen.