

The Shepherd

Beloved young people, we are sheep and we have a Shepherd. This is not true of the majority of young people, who are without a shepherd, have no hope and are without God in the world. Psalm 49:14 says of them, "Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them." Literally, "death shall *shepherd* them; death shall be their shepherd!" We are safely in the flock of the only good Shepherd. That's our glad confession at this convention, "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want." What a beautiful truth! But we must not become sentimental about this. We must understand what this confession *means*. For example, why is the most common description of Christians *sheep*? Why not mighty lions or majestic soaring eagles? Why, of all creatures, sheep? The answer is that sheep are the most helpless, stubborn, foolish, wayward, and downright stupid of the animals which God has made. But God made sheep to reflect us!

A shepherd is someone who herds sheep. And because sheep are what they are, our Shepherd is what he is. Sheep depend entirely on their shepherd. Their very survival depends on who their shepherd is. Neglect sheep, and they will suffer and die. Put them into the hands of a loving, devoted, hard working, faithful shepherd, and they will not only survive, they will flourish.

The Good Shepherd set his love upon us in eternity; he chose us to be his; he shed his blood for us to make us his; and he sent his Spirit into our hearts to unite us to him. We did nothing at all! The happy boast of the sheep in Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want." Our confession is: "I have many needs, but they are all fulfilled; I do not know the way, but my Shepherd does; I cannot fend for myself, but my Shepherd provides. Without the Shepherd, I lack everything; with the Shepherd, I lack nothing!"

Because the Shepherd owns the whole flock and each individual sheep and lamb, he determines our life for us. Devotedly, our Shepherd rules the sheep: he lives with his sheep and for his sheep, and he spends himself and is spent for his sheep. Our shepherd cannot leave his sheep unattended, not even for a moment. Jacob was a shepherd, and he describes his life this way: "*Thus it was: in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from mine eyes*" (Gen. 31:40). Long, lonely days; long, sleepless nights, simply caring for sheep as their constant companion and friend.

The Shepherd rules in three ways: by his voice, by his rod and by his staff. The Shepherd's voice comes with authority, urgency and tenderness, "My beloved sheep, listen to me, follow me. You will be safe when you follow my voice." The shepherd also carries the tools of his trade, which are his rod and staff. Psalm 23:4 tells us that these tools in the Shepherd's hand comfort the sheep. One glance at the Shepherd with his rod and staff assures the sheep that all is well because they are tokens of the Shepherd's authority. The rod and staff are also instruments of discipline. Sometimes the Shepherd applies a short, sharp blow with the club-end of his rod. A wayward sheep can be apprehended by the crook of the shepherd's staff. Just as the sheep is attempting to wander away, it feels the crook around its neck, drawing it gently but firmly back to the Shepherd. The voice of our Shepherd is the word of God, especially the preached word of God. By the preaching our Shepherd examines us and searches us. And when we do not listen, the Shepherd applies sharp but loving discipline to bring us back to our spiritual senses. Do not be inattentive when the Shepherd is speaking!

Because we are so wayward, the Shepherd must guide us. He faithfully keeps a careful, vigilant eye on us, so that he never loses even one of His sheep. It is comforting to know that when we are not attentive, he is. He pays special attention to the stragglers at the back, He has compassion upon the weak, and some sheep he even carries (Is. 40:11). The leading of the shepherd is gentle, for he never bullies or threatens, but he leads us in accordance with our capacity (Gen. 33:13-14).

The shepherd of Psalm 23 leads us "in paths of righteousness." Righteousness is the opposite of a crooked path of wickedness. Christ leads us in the way of obedience to God's commandments. Never may we say that he leads us in sin. When we walk in paths of sin we do that by wandering away from the Shepherd. And when we do wander, he restores our soul, or, literally, *He causes our soul to return*. In response to our terrified bleating as we foolishly wander into danger, the Shepherd comes to seek and find us.

Every day brings the responsibility of finding a new place for the sheep to feed. For the Shepherd this means a lot of preparation. He must examine the area carefully. Is there adequate grazing? What about threats and dangers? Any predators or poachers? Are there any poisonous weeds which might harm the sheep? Is there a good water supply? Having located the best place for his sheep, the Shepherd must lead them there because they cannot find grazing for themselves. Sheep will eat the wrong food. Some will be tempted to eat noxious weeds that look

like healthy plants and then become sick. Other sheep will gorge themselves and become bloated. The stronger sheep will bully the weaker sheep so that the weaker become malnourished. Thus it is not even enough for our Shepherd to bring the sheep to the right grazing area. He must *supervise* the feeding to make sure every sheep is properly fed!

Psalm 23:2 describes the kind of feeding that we, as Jehovah's sheep, enjoy: "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters." This is not a barren wasteland, a dried up, withered, blasted heath. This is not a field of thorns or of poisonous weeds. The Shepherd provides green pastures: rich, succulent, juicy fields of fresh grass, the choicest pasturage. And with that there are still waters, literally, "waters of rest." These are not stagnant, dirty pools which would make us sick; these are not muddy puddles; and they are not raging torrents or stormy waters that would frighten us or sweep us away. These are pools of pure, clear, tranquil waters. All of this is thanks to the work of the shepherd in providing it: "*he* maketh me to lie down ... *he* leadeth me ..." The spiritual reality of the green pastures and quiet waters is the word of God. It is perfect food for our souls: precious truths, glorious promises, sound, health-giving doctrines and sweet gospel. As sheep of Christ we dare not feed anywhere else. Do not be tempted to miss church and catechism or to fail to pay attention when you are there. That is when we must feed!

Finally, because sheep are helpless, the Shepherd protects them. Sheep have neither sharp teeth nor other weapons to fight against predators. Psalm 23 shows us that there are difficulties in the life of the sheep: the valley of the shadow of death. This is not a mistake. It is deliberate. Sometimes we wish it were otherwise: we are naturally afraid of such trials. But verse 4 does not say, "Yea though I bypass the valley of the shadow of death ..." or, "Yea, though I walk around or avoid the valley of the shadow of death ..." but, "Yea, though I *walk through* the valley of the shadow of death ..." But we need not fear the trials through which the Shepherd leads us, because he is always with us, and his rod and staff comfort us.

To sum up: imagine two sheep in two adjoining fields. One is thin, mangy, disease ridden, and miserable; the other is healthy, plump, flourishing and happy. Says the miserable sheep to the happy sheep: "Tell me, why are you so full of health; why is your wool tangle-free; why do you feed on succulent grass; why are free from parasites? And why is your life so much better than mine?" The second sheep simply smiles: "The answer, my friend, is simple: it is not

because of me. This life which I enjoy is not because of what I did. It because of my Shepherd; I owe everything to him.”

That’s our confession as happy, contended, blessed sheep of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ!