

The image of the Good Shepherd – surely one of the most beautiful, calming images in the whole Bible. Many famous art works portray the Lord God as the shepherd of his people. And it’s very reassuring, -- soothing, even – to picture our God caring for his little lambs. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, tending to your needs, watching over you, providing for and protecting even you.

This carved wood statue of the Good Shepherd hangs in the hallway at my former church in New York, right outside the gymnasium. I recall seeing school children, many times, stop in the hallway, and just stand there gazing up at this statue. This image of the Good Shepherd so often stirs up emotions, feelings, spiritual connections in the young and the old.

I know God is my Judge, my Creator, my Sovereign, my Savior. But there’s something very special, isn’t there, about the image of God as my Good Shepherd. Can you picture yourself there in the Shepherd’s strong, loving arms?

That’s a pretty good place to be, because we have so many fears, worries, anxieties. We face so many strong enemies and extreme dangers in this world. We are so often vulnerable, uncertain, even lost.

The Bible says God’s people, you and me, are like sheep. And we are. We wander into trouble. We eat too much. We butt heads. We do silly, stupid, stubborn sheep-like things. We can’t really take very good care of ourselves – especially when it comes to spiritual things, when it comes to keeping on the right path with God.

It's really not a very flattering figure of speech, to be called a sheep. But for selfish, prideful, stubborn sinful people like me, and like you, it's an apt label. "All of us, like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way," says the Good Book (Isaiah 53:6).

How wonderful it is for sheep like us to have a shepherd. And not just some mediocre, unmotivated, on-the-clock shepherd. A good shepherd. The Good Shepherd, who watches over us with love.

David writes, in the famous Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd." He doesn't say, "The Lord may be my shepherd. I hope the Lord is my shepherd. If I'm a good enough, faithful enough, obedient enough sheep, then the Lord might be willing to be my shepherd." Confidently, David says, "The Lord is my shepherd.'

And then so much more. "I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." Sorry, I'm shifting back to the old King James Version of the psalm. This is how I learned Psalm 23 as a child, and it's stuck with me. "He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

When you say this psalm from your heart with David, you are expressing tremendous confidence in the Shepherd's care. Despite all the hardships and stresses of everyday living in 2021, the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He brings me rest. He leads me on my way. He restores my weary soul. He brings me to righteousness that I can never find on my own.

What a beautiful picture of all the wonderful things God does for his people, for you and me! When we put our trust and

faith in God's great care, in God's perfect provision, we begin to live with confidence.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." The psalm writer reminds us that living in God's care doesn't mean we won't have to travel through any terrifying dangers. Being a sheep in God's flock doesn't exempt us from any life troubles, or make our life journeys smooth and easy.

But we can take those journeys and face those troubles with confidence. Not because we've got it all together, not because we're so tough and strong, not because we've become super-smart sheep. "I will fear no evil," the psalm says, "For thou art with me."

Confidence comes from knowing God is with you, believing that he never forsakes you. The image is the careful, compassionate shepherd, whose 24-7 job it is to watch over the flock. Shepherds protect, shepherds lead, shepherds provide, shepherds never leave.

And that's our God. "I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

I keep in my office this wooden staff. Someone polished up a piece of driftwood, and gave it to me. It's pretty solid, hefty. I wouldn't want to get hit with it. But my God is pretty solid and hefty, too. He uses his power to guard my soul, to ward off my enemies, to keep me on the path of faith, helping me to know Jesus as my Good Shepherd.

The words of Psalm 23 are inscribed on this staff. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

These are such remarkably confident words. Absolutely certain, 100% convicted words; and words so very important for our spiritual lives. Because we live every day in a spiritually-hostile culture. We're part of a society, a humanity, that's more and more unchurched, unconcerned about God's wishes, and unwilling to accept God's Word as authoritative. Our kids are growing up these days in a culture that's drifting farther and farther away from God, and caring less and less about what God says is important.

But even in the midst of all this, our God prepares a table before us, in the presence of our enemies. God feeds our souls today with his forgiving grace in Jesus Christ. God anoints his baptized people with his Holy Spirit again today, to keep us in the faith and in the fold. Our cup of blessings from God – even in these troubled times – is overflowing. Be confident in your Shepherd's care.

Even to the very end. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life," concludes the psalm, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." How can we be so bold? Why so confident? Because our Good Shepherd is the one who laid down his life for the sheep. Jesus Christ is the one who sacrificed himself on the cross for our sake. The one who rose from the grave to prove, to verify, to make us absolutely certain and 100% convicted, that God's salvation is complete. Your soul is saved. Your dwelling place, in the house of the Lord, is forever secure.

I challenge you to read Psalm 23 this week every day. If you don't have it inscribed on a piece of driftwood, open your Bible. Read these words every day this week. And then live with confidence. You'll still face struggles. You'll be tested. We'll all still act like sheep. But we live with confidence in the Good Shepherd's care. Amen.