

He Leadeth Us

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

God, as we now open your Word, we pray this:

Open unto us — light for our darkness.
Open unto us — courage for our fear.
Open unto us — hope for our despair.
Open unto us — peace for our turmoil.
Open unto us — joy for our sorrow.
Open unto us — strength for our weakness.
Open unto us — wisdom for our confusion.
Open unto us — forgiveness for our sins.
Open unto us — love for our hate.
Open unto us — thy Self for my self.

Lord, Lord, open your Word unto us!
Amen.

Background

Psalm 23. It's probably the most read, most prayed, and most beloved Psalm.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

The Lord is my shepherd. In the Gospels, Jesus said, I am the good what? Shepherd. He is good, and he guides and he guards. The Good Shepherd is no hired hand. He doesn't fleece his sheep. Jesus says, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." The Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine, risking life and limb, to seek out lost sheep, rescue them, even lays down his life for them. Jesus is not only the Good Shepherd, he is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He's literally a sacrificial leader, giving his life as a ransom for many.

The Good Shepherd is also the sinless sheep. He's one of us, yet he's different from us. I want to encourage you, as you hear this most familiar Psalm, to think of not only God the Father, but also God the Son. At the feeding of the five thousand in the gospels, Jesus had compassion on the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He prepared a table for the hungry in the wilderness. As John says in his gospel, Jesus led them along green grass, or green pastures, and by the restful waters, of the Sea of Galilee.

Scripture: Psalm 23 (KJV)

A psalm of David, who also was a shepherd. A song of comfort-in-the-midst-of-difficulty and hope-in-the-midst-of-despair.

Let's hear the word of the Lord to us.

I encourage you to read it out loud with me wherever you are.

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me
in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever." KJV

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

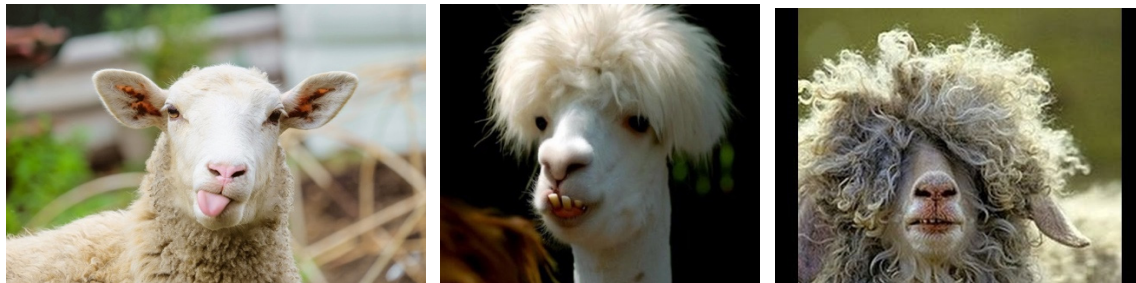
SERMON – He Leadeth Us

In 1981, less than three months after taking office, Ronald Reagan was hospitalized after being shot in an assassination attempt. The Speaker of the House at the time, Tip O'Neal, went to visit Reagan in the hospital. Reagan and O'Neal were on opposite ends of the political spectrum—but they were both Irishmen and Christians and they were friends—especially after 6:00 pm. Tip walked over to Reagan's bedside and knelt down. The Democrat and the Republican joined hands. They began to recite Psalm 23 together. "Thanks for coming, Tip," the Gipper managed to whisper. After the Scripture reading, Tip rose, kissed Reagan on the forehead and said he didn't want to keep him from his rest—and left the room. That's why I love the Psalms. They bring us together.

The Psalms articulate the big things—life and death, lament and hope, and how God is there to get us thru it all—together.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

In other words, with God I have all I need—even if I don't have everything.



If God is like a shepherd, that means we're a lot like sheep. In fact, if you want to learn about human nature, a good place to look is the sheep. The prophet Isaiah puts it this way:

**"We all like sheep have gone astray,
each of us have turned to our own way."**

To put it bluntly, as one farmer says, "sheep are dumb." Sheep are creatures of habit, they fall into ruts. Like sheep, we want to get settled in those green pastures—they're comfortable. But the shepherd knows, if sheep graze too long in one place, they'll turn green pastures into a desert wasteland. Sometimes the grass is greener on the other side!

**"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters."**

The Good Shepherd and guardian of our souls keeps us on the move. His leading usually takes constant adjustment—but it's good for us. Shepherds not only go wherever the sheep go, the shepherd never takes the sheep to places he hasn't already been. He scouts out the terrain for his sheep. He goes ahead, taking field notes and noticing where poisonous vegetation or dangerous passes might be. Our God isn't only a With-Us God, he's a Go-Before God. The shepherd always

thinks of the flock, watching over them 24-7. The shepherd always sleeps with one eye open and his two eyelids peeled. God is ever aware of our needs.

Sheep also blindly follow one another—often to dangerous places. We Homo sapiens have that herd mentality too. There are good gatherings of the flock, and then there are bad gatherings—where the flock devolves into a riot or mob. Contrary to popular belief, sheep aren't easy to herd. In fact, rumor has it, sheep are harder to herd than cats.

"He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

What's the message here? Trust God. God is trustworthy. He's leading you, leading me, leading us. We're moving forward—content, but not complacent. Things maybe aren't great, but with God, I'm good. We're going to be OK. When we follow the Good Shepherd, we don't have to force our way. We follow forward. Take the leap of faith forward. We have to trust God that he's leading us along right paths—not for our glory, but for his name's sake. And so as we practice good "followership" after the Good Shepherd, we bring honor to God's name, not our own. Thine is the glory, not mine. Thine, not mine.

We're all on our journey. There are a lot of paths out there for our journey. Not all are good. Just because you're on a path doesn't mean it's a good one. Many paths are dead ends and detours. You could even find yourself on the path to perdition. But the Good Shepherd, who himself is also "the way, the truth, and the life," guides our way along righteous paths—paths that lead us to still waters and rest—soul-restoring paths.

But God's paths are not always wide or easy. Right paths sometimes go smack through the valley of the shadow of death. Not around, but through. God makes us tough and tender. Even death can't barricade or close down the paths of righteousness, for we are a resurrection people. We rise up, even from death. With Jesus, we can't be kept down. Right paths will at times take us to difficult, uncomfortable places. Places of uncertainty where we have to trust. Where we have to ask the tough questions, have difficult conversations. The darkest valley can be lots of things, not just our death bed—national crises, pandemics, polarized politics, the loss of loved ones—dangers, toils, and snares.

"I will fear no evil: for thou art with me."

But the Good Shepherd leads us and gives us safe passage and protection—through it, not around it. Or as Marcus Aurelius said, "The obstacle is the way." I fear no evil, we fear no evil. Why? because Thou art with me, You are with me, Presence. We fear not, but we can still be scared. It's wise to be aware, alert, cautious, and prepared. David knew not only that God prepared a table before him, but he was very aware that he had enemies in his presence. We don't fear, but our eyes are wide-open. God has our back. He's near us. Or as Paul encourages his timid protégé Timothy:

**"God has not given us a spirit of fear,
but of power, and of love,
and of a sound mind."**

Yet bad things still happen, even if you're not a black sheep in the family of God. Have you ever heard of a cast down sheep? Sheep are always in danger of turning over on their back—and getting stuck. Even the strongest and healthiest sheep can become cast down sheep—they need outside help to get up—or else they'll die with their legs sticking up. Shepherds' will spend hours looking for one cast down sheep. When the shepherd finds the cast down sheep—he embraces it, picks it up, and rejoices. He lovingly picks out the excrement, mud, burrs, sticks, and ticks from its wool.

Our God is a tender God, merciful, and forgiving towards us when we stumble and fall, dusting us off, and getting us back on our feet when we're cast down, or downcast, hard pressed, depressed, or discouraged.

But here's the interesting thing—the shepherd doesn't coddle or pamper the sheep for long. He toughens them up with a stricter regimen and a better diet to make the sheep less likely of becoming cast down again. To be a Christian doesn't mean you're a pushover. God lovingly tends us. He also stretches us, challenges us, and pushes us to grow in Christ, to grow in faith. God's presence is strong.

“Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

The rod of God fends off predators and the staff brings wandering sheep back into the pack and along the path. And remember, it's God's rod, God's staff, not our own, not a human ruler's big stick.

“My cup runneth over.”

And don't forget your cup. Our cup is not empty—it's full. Some people don't even believe there is a cup, or that it's a cup of wrath rather than a cup of blessing. Others see the cup half-empty, some half-full. But the Christian sees the cup of blessing as not only full, but filled to overflowing with blessings. It takes the eyes of faith and a whole lot of trust to remember our cup overfloweth. This way, we enjoy the abundant life and we drink deep of it—even in the face of lack.

“Thou anointest my head with oil.”

The sheep's head is also particularly vulnerable to a parasite that gives them scabs on their heads. In those times, the shepherd in ancient Palestine would apply olive oil mixed with spices to the sheep's head as a balm. Whether it be pesky physical ailments we face, a thorn in the flesh, difficult people to live with, or the designs of Beelzebub, the lord of the flies in the ointment, God knows we need the healing balm of the Spirit to mend our brokenness, in mind, body, and spirit.

When we have a deep sense of God's provision, we're freed to be generous ourselves. We see life differently. We interpret life situations in a new light.

**“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life.”**

In fact, a better translation than “follow” is “pursue.” Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me like the hound of heaven. Or maybe more accurately, the sheep dog of heaven! In fact, repeat if you will the Psalm's refrain with me.

We're uncertain about how to pay the rent:

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

My loved one has tested positive:

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

My brain is getting fried and I'm tired of staring at the computer screen all day and I can't figure out how to work Zoom:

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

What's going to happen to our country?

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

When are we going to be able to worship together in joy?

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

God, I want to give, I don't want to be selfish—but I'm scared to give more to your kingdom ...

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

I'm feeling worn out and discouraged by this pandemic:

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

This is the hope God gives us individually and collectively as a church. David concludes with these words:

"And I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever." I will.

The Lord's house, the temple, symbolizes God's presence. With God's presence in us and with us, everlasting life is the last word, not death. Although we die, we have unending days with our Maker, here on earth, and then in heaven. And then, when our time on earth is done, we'll be together in joy once again—for all eternity.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Together for Joy" – Courtesy of [SaltProject.org](https://saltproject.org)

The Holy Bible, New King James Version, Copyright © 1982 Thomas Nelson. All rights reserved.