

## **Promise**

Psalm 23

April 29, 2012

*The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.*

I need rest ...

I get tired. I run out of gas. I need time to get away from the stress of demands and duties and deadlines.

*The Lord is my shepherd; he lets me rest in fields of green grass.*

I need to be refreshed ...

I get thirsty. My soul gets stale and dry. I need times and places that feed my spirit and revive my body.

*The Lord is my shepherd; he leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.*

I need to be recharged ...

I run out of energy. I run out of wisdom. I reach the end of my rope. I come to the end of my resources.

*The Lord is my shepherd; he gives me new strength.*

I need guidance ...

I need to know what is right and what is wrong, what is wise and what is foolish. I need help making sense of a life that is anything but black and white. I need to find my way again when I have gotten off track.

*The Lord is my shepherd; he guides me in the right paths, as he has promised.*

I need to be protected ...

There are dangers all around me: the threat of accident or storm or illness or even violence, the threat of temptation or depression or oppression.

*The Lord is my shepherd; his rod and staff protect me.*

I need to be valued ...

I need to be affirmed, encouraged, loved. I need to matter to somebody. I need to matter.

*The Lord is my shepherd; he welcomes me as an honored guest.*

*The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.*

I do. And that's the problem! That's the problem I have struggled with all week as I have thought about this psalm. It's easy for me to say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need," because I do have everything I need!

But what about them?

What about Rex and Bobbie, Rocky Petersen's brother and sister-in-law, who lost their nineteen-year-old daughter, Lauren, this week in a house fire? What about Lauren herself, dying so horribly and dying so young, her whole life still ahead of her? Can they say, "The Lord is my shepherd; his rod and staff protect me?"

What about the young man I met with this week who has been shot at and assaulted and disrespected by his peers, for whom this community is a scary and lonely and cruel place, a young man trying to get his life together, but still paying a steep price for youthful mistakes, told again and again he needs to turn his life around but met again and again with rejection and disdain and new disappointment? Can he say, "The Lord is my shepherd; he guides me in the right paths, as he has promised?"

What about the people I know today living with illnesses for which there is no treatment, illnesses that are taking life and energy and strength from them piece by piece? Can they say, "The Lord is my shepherd; he gives me new strength?"

What about the people, half of the people now living on this planet, who live on less than \$2.50 a day? That's \$75 a month, \$900 a year! Could you live on that? Could you live on that? Can they say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need?"

Is this a psalm for the privileged few? Is this a God for the privileged few? Or is it not about God at all, just about the fortunes of birth and place and circumstance? Do the blessed merely flatter themselves to think that their blessing is a sign of God's care for them?

How can I say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need," when you don't? How can I believe in a God of goodness and love when I see other people suffer?

Who gets tired?

Who gets thirsty?

Who runs out of energy?

Who gets lost?

Who feels threatened?

Who find themselves in places of deepest darkness?

Who needs affirmation?

Who needs God?

I do. They do. You do. We all do. In the end, our needs are the same. In the end, we are the same.

I may be more or less privileged, more or less wealthy, more or less healthy, more or less fortunate, but in the end, I will die, as will you. And in the end, or really, all along the way, both you and I and all of them will find that our own resources are inadequate for our needs. We will find, if we are honest, that our needs run far deeper than anything we can supply for ourselves or anything another can supply for us. You and I and all of them need God. What we have, any of us, what we are, any of us, is by God's grace, only by God's grace.

We are the same. There is no real difference between us, no real difference between any of us. Which is why I think the familiar saying gets it all wrong: "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

When I say that I am looking at you, saying your misfortune could be easily be my misfortune, but for the grace of God. So the grace of God picks and chooses? Picks and chooses between you and me? Spares me, but doesn't spare you? Helps me, but doesn't help you? Tomorrow your misfortune may indeed be mine, and will that mean that God has forgotten me, that God's grace has abandoned me?

No! No! None of us live except by God's grace, and if tomorrow I find myself in the deepest darkness, it is God's grace that will sustain me there. "I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me."

We are sustained by God's grace, all the time. It's just in certain times we are made more conscious of our need. And faith that is mature, faith that is genuine, knows that. I can say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need," not because everything in my life is rosy, not on the basis of circumstance, but on the basis of trust, because I trust in God's promise. I can say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need," because when I have God, I have everything I need.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.*

But what about them? What about you?

I can't say, "The Lord is your shepherd; you have everything you need." I can't say that for you. It would be entirely presumptuous and inappropriate for me to say that for you, and for you to say that for me, and for either of us to say that for anybody else.

I have my story and you have yours. It's like Aslan, the lion, said to Aravis in one of the Narnia tales of C. S. Lewis, when Aravis was asking what would become of a young woman whom she had wronged:

*Child, I am telling you your story, not hers. No one is told any story but their own.*

The words of the psalm tell my story, my own experience of the goodness and love of God that I know will be with me all my life, whatever my life brings me. The words of the psalm are personal, a song sung certainly as a public witness to the goodness of God, but a song sung almost to myself, and, finally, a song sung to God. "You are with me." "You protect me." "You welcome me." "Your love will be with me."

I can only speak for me. I cannot speak for you, and I cannot speak for Rex or Bobbie or Lauren, or that young man, or my sick friends, or the billions of people now alive who must survive on so little. They will have to speak for themselves, of what they know of God's goodness and love. You will have to speak for yourself, of what you know of God's goodness and love.

I speak for me and I say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need," and I know it's true, not because my particular life circumstances happen to be better than most, but because having God, I do have everything I need.

So if tomorrow I fall exhausted or get sick or feel threatened, if tomorrow I face loss or face death, if tomorrow I find myself in the deepest darkness or surrounded by enemies, you will have to ask me again, and I will still say (oh, may it be so, Lord, that I would still say it!), "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need."

But, today, I can only answer for today, and I can only answer for me. What do you say ... today?