



The language of the King James translation, to me, captures this psalm in ways that more current translations do no. If you know it, please say along with me:

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴Yea, 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.

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.¹

Six short verses but what a punch they pack. We memorize these verses and recite them in times of trouble and anxiety and very often at funerals. Why are they comforting? Perhaps because in these few words we have a global understanding of God, our relationship with God and our future.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

The image of God as shepherd is one that appears time and again in the Bible and in art. Among the most remembered pictures is that of Jesus with a lamb being carried in his arms or over his shoulders. One of the famous images of Jesus is as shepherd- the one who leaves the 99 sheep to find the one that is lost.

A shepherd is one who cares for the flock – doesn't matter if any individual is a teacher's pet or class clown or just plain difficult. The shepherd cares for each member of the flock. Being cared by the shepherd means the shepherd will do what is possible to ensure that our needs are met; for and in relationship with the shepherd we have no wants. If we are in right relationship with God, even though our physical wants may be lacking, we have what we need to see us through. We can count on the shepherd to be with us.

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

¹¹ King James version, Psalm 23. BCP 476.

Green pastures and still waters. Grass to eat- better than what some sheep get- the leftover stubble. If you remember your American history, there were range wars between those who raised cattle and those who raised sheep. If the sheep grazed before the cattle, there was nothing left for the cattle to eat. But sheep could graze after the cattle and find sufficient food. But in this psalm, the sheep don't have to wait to graze until others have been through. They get to eat of the green grass. The image is of plenty. The shepherd knows the sheep need to be nourished and not only finds food but good food.

If you've ever tried to drink water from a running faucet or stream, you know that drinking from still water is much, much easier. I've heard it said that sheep will not drink if the water is moving too quickly. They need the water to be still in order to be able to drink it. The shepherd knows this and has found a place with both food and drink.

*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths
of righteousness for his name's sake.*

The image now changes from a shepherd to God. Our faith and trust in God lead to the restoration of our soul. Following God leads us in ways that are right. With faith and trust in God, we become the best that we can be – our soul is full of the love of God and our paths give witness to God.

*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.*

The psalmist tells it true – and Jesus confirms it when he tells us that in this world we will have trouble. Life as we know it is not always a bowl of cherries in the famous words of humorist Erma Bombeck.

There will be valleys. There will be the shadow of death. But that is not all there is. We can fear no evil for God is with us. And note especially that we walk through the valley of the shadow of death- we do not remain mired there.

The rod and the staff of the shepherd- used to corral the sheep to keep them safe and to beat away predators and are used to keep us safe in God's love. We can walk through the valley of the shadow of death because God is with us.

Mary Stevenson's poem: "Footsteps in the sand" (1936) captures this poignantly:

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord.
Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.

In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand.
Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was one only.

1 Sam. 16:1-13; Ps. 23; Eph. 5:8-14; John 9:1-31

This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints, so I said to the Lord,

“You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always.

But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand.

Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?”

The Lord replied, “The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you.”

Although we may not always feel God’s presence, the dark night of the soul is very real. We can rest assured that God is present. God has promised to be with us to the end of the age. Nothing we can do will cause God to turn away from us –we are the ones who turn out back on God. God’s hand always remains outstretched – waiting for us to turn back to God.

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

When we walk through the valley of death – those places and times in our life when we feel most alone, most lonely, most afraid, God is, in fact, present.

Indeed, God is walking with us for the promise before us is of rest, a banquet overflowing, and anointing signaling that we are, in fact, the beloved of God and more than we can possibly imagine.

This is the promise- the God who loves us, the God who calls us beloved will care for us in all ways necessary and will provide more than enough. Our cup will overflow with the goodness of God.

*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.*

Daysprings cards has a series featuring three cats. Their names are Shirley, Goodness and Mercy. A humorous reminder of this last verse. The promise that God’s goodness and God’s mercy will pursue us all the days of our lives. If we will acknowledge God as shepherd, as Lord and Savior, we will be cradled in God’s loving care. Know that God’s hand is outstretched towards yours. All you have to do is accept the offer. And if you do, goodness and mercy will be your portion. The good shepherd will care for you and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever and ever, **Amen**.