

O Lord, our God and our Father, we come this evening to a portion of your words which is very precious to the heart of every son or daughter of heaven. And we thank you, Father, for the way you've spoken to us through these words on countless times. At a child's bedside, perhaps, or a parent's gravesite, we've quoted these words to ourselves. And the Lord has come near to us and comforted us. If we look at this psalm this evening, Father, we pray that nothing I say would undermine His preciousness, but that Your Holy Spirit will come and fill Your servant with all of the fullness of God, that Your children who are called by Your name this evening might be able to suck sweetness from this psalm. perhaps in ways they've never thought of before, O God, not because I say anything particularly insightful, but because your Holy Spirit, as only your Holy Spirit can do, will take the Word of God and bring it home to the hearts of the people of God in the power of the Spirit of God. And we offer these prayers tonight, O God. Without Jesus, we can do nothing. O Jesus, draw near to us and help us. For Christ's sake, we pray. Amen. Well, if you would, please turn with me in your copy of the Word of God to Psalm 23, which is surely, as I said in our prayer, one of the most precious portions of Scripture in all the Bible. Many a saint has found here a pillow for their dying head, and as is the case with all of the Psalms, if you want to know the comfort of this Psalm as you die, you must first know the comfort of this Psalm as you live this evening. And do you remember it comes in a context? It's nestled between Psalm 22 and Psalm 24. Psalm 22 looks back to the appalling cost of your redemption, what Christ had to pay to be your shepherd. He is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the flock, of course. And then Psalm 24 looks forward to where you will go when you come to die, as the angels carry your soul heavenward. And the battlements of heaven that have been closed tight against the sons and daughters of man for generations now swing open to the sons and daughters of God in Christ Jesus. And with Christ, as He enters in through His resurrected glory, we will enter in too. And then Psalm 23, between the two. shows us the blessings of what it means to be one of the sheep of the Lord Jesus in this brief veil of tears wherein we find ourselves this evening. Please listen carefully. This is the Word of God. A Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his namesake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me. in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Well, most of the time, even in a fallen world, there is a blessed predictability to life. Day follows night, spring follows winter, and success normally follows hard work. And of course, though we know enough living as we do east of Eden under the sun where all is vanity, we know that predictably, it's not going to be plain sailing. that life will throw a fair share of what you might call predictable unpredictabilities our way. We step onto the scale after 24 hours of hard, and I mean hard, dieting. And not only have you not lost a pound, you've gained three pounds. And you think, what gives? We're late for an important job interview, perhaps a meeting that's vital. We're rushing out of the house. We spill coffee on our tie. We run to the car, and there's a flat tire. And we think, who would have thunk? Well, you're a college student, and you spend all semester studying for your finals, and you open your exam, and all of the questions you thought would be in the exam weren't, and the one question you were

sure would never be on the exam was, and you go away thinking, who would have thunk? Life's predictable unpredictability. And then, every so often, life will blindside you. You'll feel gut-punched by life when something you never expected comes your way. A hard-working Christian man in a business, doing well, record fourth quarter, he goes into work full of the joys of the Lord and finds the pink slip on his desk. Or as I've told you before recently, two young mothers up in Greensboro with young children, both of them in their 30s, suddenly find out they've got stage four breast cancer. Or a girl I knew back in Savannah, a beautiful Christian girl, godly girl, involved in church, doing everything right. She's two weeks out before her marriage, goes out into the backyard, sits on a hammock between two small trees. And little did she know that one of the trees was rotten. She sits in the hammock. The tree snaps. The hammock collapses. She falls on the ground, looks up, and the tree falls and lands on her head and shatters her cervical spine and leaves her completely paralyzed from the neck down. Two weeks before her marriage. Where will you turn? What songs will you sing when life gut punches you? And there are lots of choices, aren't there? You have the stoic of R.E.M.'s song. When your day is long and the night is yours alone, when you're sure you've had enough of this life, well, hang on. Don't let yourself go. Because everybody cries and everybody hurts sometimes. Well, that's very helpful. There's a classic example I was telling my children recently about a lot. There's some glorious modern praise songs. So I'm not lambasting all modern praise songs. But I said to my children, when you're singing a song, stop. Before you hear the tune, look at the words. Do the words have the power in themselves to bring your soul Godward? God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. Those are great even before you hear the tune. In fact, the words are better than the tune, I think. And then some of the modern songs just don't quite take you there. All of you is more than enough for all of me. And you think, well, tell me more. I need more to get my soul Godward in the morning. You've got the stoic, you've got the cynic, Macbeth. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time. And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to a dusty death. Out, out, brief candle. Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It's a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Life is meaningless. Life's a joke and the universe is a comedian, I was telling the college students this morning. And sometimes even Christians can find themselves falling into that kind of thinking. We find ourselves saying, you know, well, how are you doing? Well, you know, it's a dog's life, we say to ourselves. Nature's red in tooth and claw. We live in a dog-eat-dog world. And I can identify with that. Back in Northern Ireland, And you can tell an awful lot about a culture by how we greet one another, right? In Northern Ireland, if you ask an Irish man, how's he doing? 99 times out of 100, you'll get the stock response. Not too bad. There's a worldview in that, a whole world in life. Not too bad, because we have three seasons, wet, wetter, and wettest. And with this negative view in the world of Northern Ireland, it's almost as if we're frightened to say, it's going fantastic, just in case the unseen, almighty hand of providence says, we'll soon see about that, Jimmy. Well, in Psalm 23, David, who knows a thing or two about shepherding and a thing or two about sheep, comes alongside you, Christian, and he says to you, you know, on your best day, and on your worst, it's never a dog's life for the Christian. It's always and only a sheep's life. And David says, let me tell you

what you can expect. If you take Yahweh to be your shepherd, he will do for you what he's done for me. He will be for you what he's been for me. What's it like having Yahweh as your shepherd? Oh, David says, listen to me. And especially here this evening, if any of you don't share our faith yet in this congregation, hope this psalm beckons you, tempts you. Take all of the pieces of your soul, all of your hopes, all of your dreams, all of your fears, and you give them to Jesus. And you take him as your shepherd, David says. He'll do for you what he's done for me. What's that? Oh, well, when I'm hungry, he feeds me. And when I'm lost, he finds me. And when I'm scared, he's with me. And when I come to die, he brings me all the way home. Isn't he lovely? Let's work through it together quickly. First of all, when I'm hungry, he feeds me. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want, I shall never want anything, Dr. Davis says, a great resident Hebrew scholar. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. Got to quote the King James. The shepherd's got two primary rules, right? Feeding the sheep when they're hungry and protecting the sheep when they're in danger. And both are alluded to in this psalm. Yahweh is my shepherd. This is a personal business. He doesn't delegate it to the angels, not even the archangels or the seraphim or the cherubim. This is a rule God himself takes for each and every sheep. Yahweh. We said a week or two ago, I forget when I said this, but that Yahweh is built on the Hebrew verb to be, or to be present. And Dr. Davis has a glorious translation, as Dr. Davis does, of that word. Yahweh, what's it mean? It means, I will be present, that is what I will be. Lord sounds so much more impersonal, but the name is Yahweh. It's Yahweh's personal name. And David says, Yahweh is not just our shepherd, which of course he is, but Yahweh is my shepherd, which means he takes personal responsibility for each and every sheep. It's not corporate. It's personal. Remember, Luther, the Christian life is a thing of pronouns, personal pronouns. It's one thing to say, the Lord is our rock, and our fortress, and our shield. But it's all the difference in the world when you can look up to heaven and say, the Lord is my rock, and my refuge, and my fortress, and my shield. My sheep, Jesus says, hear my voice. And I know them, and they follow me. There's a beautiful book, if you haven't got it, you should buy it, by Douglas MacMillan. Professor MacMillan was a professor in Scotland in the middle part of the last century. He died of a heart attack. He went for a walk in the hills in the 80s and never came home. Not at least to his family, but he went home to God. But before he was a minister of the gospel, he was a shepherd of sheep in the highlands of Scotland. And his little book, *The Lord Our Shepherd*, is a glorious book. Small little book. The Banner published it. It'll repay your careful reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting. But he and his brother were both shepherds. And I can't remember whether they were twins or whether they were just close in age. But like Victoria and Ann Forrest, who sang so beautifully for us, when you're a brother or sister, your voices meld together. And sometimes they can be hard to tell apart. In fact, even their wives couldn't tell the voice of the one brother from the other. And they had endless fun with that on the telephone. But the sheep could. And Douglas and his brother would look after the sheep. And Douglas went off to college for a few years and came back. And he went down to the flock in the summer, and he called the sheep. But the sheep didn't come. And then his brother came down, and Elbudim was a younger brother, sometimes does. He called the sheep, and the sheep came running to the shepherd. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them. Do you know what it is in your soul to hear the voice of the good shepherd? There's a tenderness here, there's an intimacy here that is glorious.

That Christ has a particular care and a particular love for all of his sheep. We haven't got time to think much in this, I'm looking forward to preaching it to you in a few months, but in John 11, right, Jesus gets word from Mary and Martha about Lazarus. And they don't even ask him for help, they just say, the one you love is sick. And Jesus tells the messenger, tell them this sickness will not end in death, but for the glory of God. Now if you heard that message, what would you think? Lazarus isn't going to die, right? So the messenger goes back, and no time to explain it now, but by the time he gets back to town, Lazarus is already dead. And he says, don't worry, the master says, this sickness will not end in death but for the glory of God. And Mary says, are you clawed? We just buried her brother 10 minutes ago. And worst of all, Christ doesn't go back with them. And it sounds appallingly callous. Why didn't Christ go back? Why didn't Christ do something? And of course, he does something. That's the rest of the story later on. Another sermon. But John incorporates a beautiful little cameo portrait after Christ gives a word of life to a family about to be bereaved by death. And you're thinking, why would he say that? John says, now Jesus loved that family. No, he doesn't say that. He says, now Jesus loved Mary. And he loved Martha. And he loved Lazarus. It's beautiful. He had a particular love for each member of the family. And it just won't do for John to say he loved them. No, he loved them each in the individuality of their particularity. And I tell you this evening, Christian, Jesus has not changed. His heart's not gone cold or callous. He loves each of you here, his people, his sheep, with a particular love. And he looks after you with a particular care. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters. A non-shepherd would never write that, because only a shepherd would know what it means for a sheep to lie down. Sheep only lie down when they feel completely and absolutely safe. They're nervous creatures. And unlike a dog, a sheep will not drink from running water. The water's got to be completely still. So the shepherd knows well how to take care of the individual needs of the sheep. We come then, as one computer put it, to the first of the two knots in the psalm. I shall not want and I shall not fear. And it's His presence that gives the sheep confidence. He makes me. Just when He's with me, I have the confidence to lie down in the midst of a storm because He's there and He makes me. I will be present. That is what I shall be. Secondly, when I'm lost, He finds me. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His namesake. We think of sheep as cuddly, cute beasties that you put in your child's bed and they cuddle with at nighttime. When the Bible thinks of sheep, that's not what it thinks. When the Bible thinks of a sheep, it thinks of an animal that is completely and utterly and irretrievably stupid. One of my friends back in Northern Ireland, Actually, he was a mentor to my wife during her college years, Cole Stewart, no relation to me. But after he retired from the police force in Northern Ireland, he became a shepherd. And he looked at me one day with just despair and said, sheep are the stupidest animals in the face of God's green earth. They're the only animal that will leave a verdant, green, lush pasture for a wilderness just because they can. Isaiah captures this, doesn't he? All we, like sheep, have gone astray. All we, like sheep, have gone astray. Turned each one to our own way. Alec Mateer, commenting on that, says, all of us to a man have turned astray. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Expresses both the common culpability and individual responsibility of sin. We cannot blame a herd instinct even though we are all alike implicated. Over against the common herd and matching the individual need, there stands him on whom our iniquity was laid and the Lord

has laid upon him the iniquity of us all. But the actual, the bit I was hoping I'd put the wrong code in, forgive me. But all we, all of us, have turned each one to our own way. We have our own each individual ways of stupidity. That the fallenness of human nature affects us all to a man and to a woman. We bring it with us everywhere we go. We have our own unique way of escalating conflict in our home, don't we? Our own unique way of making stupid choices. And this is where the shepherd comes in. He restoreth my soul. The Hebrew word for restore literally means he causes my soul to repent. It's the repentance word, the spiritual U-turn we spoke about this morning. And that when the sheep are lost, we don't find ourselves, he finds us. He restores us. He turns us back again. That's why repentance, though it's necessary, can never be part of earning our salvation because even though our feet turn and our wills turn, ultimately we aren't responsible for that. It's something that God does for us and does to us and does in us. He restoreth my soul. It's a job for him to do or it'll never be done by you. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake, in the right path for the right reason." Isn't that a beautiful picture? Maybe you find yourself struggling with sin, and which of us doesn't? And maybe it's a sin you find yourself going back to again and again and again, like a dog returns to his vomit, the fool returns to his folly, and you just can't break yourself free. I preach to you a Savior whose voice can break any bondage. Come to Jesus. Take your heart to Him. He who died for the broken hearts of wounded sinners knows best how to heal them. Maybe you think to yourself, what's the point of coming back to God? After all that I have done, He would never take me back again. Remember the story in Luke 15? Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, oh, this man eats with sinners and receives them. So he told them this parable. What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. When he comes home, he calls together his friend and his neighbor, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost. Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. And I'm telling you this evening, don't take counsel from your fears. Never, anytime, but especially this time, don't let the devil tell you, oh no, Christ's heart's much harder than that. He's much colder than that. He'll not be joyful at the thought of you coming back. In this parable, right, the sheep that was found wasn't looking for the shepherd. It was out and lost. It was the shepherd who went out and found the sheep and brought it back home. Now, do you think, really, that the shepherd who finds the sheep running from him will reject you when you run to him. Never. When I'm hungry, he feeds me. When I'm lost, he finds me. When I'm scared, he's with me. And again, forgive me reading the King James, but it's one of those passages, you've got to read this in the King James. "'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.'" A valley sounds like a pleasant place. green, verdant, like one of those Thomas Kinkadee paintings where even the snow looks warm. But the actual Hebrew here is not really a valley. It's actually, though I walk through the midst of death's dark gorge, it's the most foreboding place on earth. And notice there's a change in the sound. Compare verse 1 with verse 4. What's the difference? Do you

see it? In verse 1, he's talking about the shepherd. In verse 4, he's talking to the shepherd. Yea, though I walk through the valley of death's dark gorge, I will fear no evil, not because he is with me, for you are with me." It's the reflex of the soul. Even as David considers this awful prospect of walking toward death, death literal or metaphorical, the great dangers of life. When the darkness comes in like a flood, and our fears are magnified, and we don't know which way to run, we don't know which way to look, and we're terrified, even as he starts thinking about that in his mind, he can no longer talk about the shepherd. He talks to the shepherd. I think it's Motyer or Kidner says, because the nearer the danger, the nearer the shepherd. And even the thought of it causes David's soul to draw near to Christ. I will fear no evil. It's wonderful. The word shepherd, I'm indebted to Johnny Gibson, Professor Gibson, who's from Northern Ireland and is up in Westminster for this insight. But the Hebrew word for shepherd and the Hebrew word for evil are almost identical in their spelling. My shepherd is ra'i. And evil is ra. They're spelt the same, but they're pronounced differently. And he has this wonderful phrase, as Dr. Gibson does, we have a ra-e for all of life's ra's. We have a shepherd for all of life's evils. I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. In my study, I have two tools. Well, I did in Greensboro. I'm trying to find one of them. I have a shepherd's crook and I have a tactical tomahawk. I've lost a shepherd's crook. I think it's in my garage somewhere, buried amidst 1,000 boxes, but we're going to bring it up. And they remind me that every shepherd needs two tools in his arsenal, one for the sheep and one for the wolves. And as these sheep trot along beside the Lord Jesus, they look up, and he's carrying his. And you could take it two ways. There's the curved end of the shepherd's crook, which the shepherd will use to his staff to gather the sheep out of a ravine, maybe, when he's stuck. Then there's the flat end, which you'll use for a wolf or the sheep's backside if it gets a bit frisky. And they both comfort. But there's that sense also that the fact that the shepherd is dressed like a warrior and he means business, that the sheep find their strange comfort in looking to the shepherd's belt and seeing the tactical tomahawk there, or a pistol in modern days, or Macmillan carried a .303 rifle when the wolves came for the sheep. The shepherd is there, and he means business. He means to protect the sheep and to punish all who threaten them. I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. And then suddenly the image changes. It changes from a shepherd and a sheep to a host and a harried guest. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows." Here's a man hounded by enemies. They're all around him. They're present. But so is the shepherd. And what a difference the shepherd makes. He brings oil to renew and a cup to refresh. It's like the Lord's Table this morning. We come to the Lord's Table, and the devil's always there. The devil's always there to remind you of all of the things that you have done, and all of the things you have left undone. And he'll tell you, really, you think you're worthy to come to the Lord's table? And then your pastors, David Lawton and Henderson and Squires, they stand up with this piece of bread and this little cup of wine, little things in the world's eyes, but they're bigger than all the world. And they remind you, it's not about what you've done. It's not about what you've left undone. All that matters, my sheep, is what I have done. And it's enough. When I'm hungry, he feeds me. When I'm lost, He finds me. When I'm scared, He's with me. And then when I come to die, He brings me all the way home. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord

forever. Macmillan again in this book. He says, as a young lad, there was an old Scottish preacher who was a shepherd also. And he heard him preaching this psalm. And this old shepherd, when he'd bring the sheep down from the highlands in the fall down into the lowlands for the winter, the shepherd's out in front leading the way. But behind the flocks of sheep, the old shepherd, he says, I have two sheepdogs, Bessie and Blackie. And they follow the sheep wherever they go. And if the sheep stray to the left hand, Bessie, quick as a flash, goes and brings them down. And if the sheep stray to the right hand, Blackie, on it, and she's round, and she brings them back onto the path again. those two sheepdogs. And likewise, he said, the Lord of hosts has two sheepdogs, and they follow the flock wherever they go. And he calls the one goodness, and he calls the other mercy. Isn't that one of the most beautiful pictures? And so maybe you find yourself straying this evening. Goodness is going to go and He'll bring you back again. When you go to the right hand, mercy goes and brings you back again. Christian, look over your shoulder this evening. In sunshine or in shadow, what do you see over your shoulder? What's following you? Are you being stalked by the fear of Alzheimer's disease, cancer? old age, abandonment, whatever's coming behind you in this world, in this life. The hounds of hell may be coming behind you, snapping at your feet, but I tell you, behind you, if you look over your shoulder, every step of the way of your life, on your right hand you'll see goodness, and on your left you'll see mercy. And they will not leave you, God's goodness and God's mercy, until He brings you all the way home to the Father's house. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me. And the word follow actually is much more aggressive. It's hound me, dog my steps, pursue me. It's used of the avenger of blood chasing down the manslayer. Goodness and mercy shall find me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Richard Sibbes says, everything that comes from God to his children, it is a mercy. It is as if it were dipped in mercy before it comes to us. Every good we enjoy and every sorrow we bear is a mercy. There is not more light in the sun, there is not more water in the ocean, than there is mercy in the Father of mercies. It is His nature to His children. And that is why it is His name, the Father of mercies. And so I leave you Psalm 23 this evening. Isn't it a beautiful, beautiful picture, Christian, of your life and what Christ will be for you and what Christ will do for you? And if you're here this evening, you're not yet a Christian. This is for you. If you will come to Jesus, If you will lay down the weapons of your rebellion, for your whole life, whether you know it or know it not, is really a rebellion against God and against heaven. I was that way once too. We're hostile in mind. We don't want, we view Christ as a threat, a threat to our autonomy, to our right to have it all our own way. Lay that down, Jesus says. Stop fighting me. You'll find it much sweeter to follow me. And Christ paid an appalling cost to take blaggards like you and me as the hounds of hell and to restore us into the sheep on their way, step by step, to heaven. You come to me, Jesus says. You trust me to be your Savior. You take me to be your Lord. And when you're hungry, I will feed you. When you're lost, I will find you. When you're scared, I'll be with you. When you come to die, I'll bring you safely all the way home. Let's pray together. Father in heaven, we thank you for this lovely psalm. We thank you for the pictures and the metaphors that reveal to us the beauties and the glories and the sweetness of Jesus. And I pray that your children this evening will have tasted something of the sweetness of Christ and his comfort. the God of all comfort and the Father of mercies, that you would comfort us with the comfort of Jesus. Give us the peace of God because we have peace with God through the lamb who

was slain. In his name we pray, amen.