

Wolfgang Wegert

is the senior pastor of the ARCHE church in Hamburg, Germany, which comprises a sizable group of believers and a missionary ministry. He pastors the congregation and spends a considerable amount of time in missionary work. For many years, he has been proclaiming the Word Of God on various radio and television programs as well as on crusades in Germany and Europe (especially in countries belonging to the CIS). He is passionate about re-emphasizing the basic faith principles of the great church reformers. Pastor Wegert is married and has three grown children.



“I Shall not Want”

In this book, Pastor Wegert, who is known for his refreshing yet thorough way of communicating Biblical truths, opens up the richness of this well-known Psalm. It is in Jesus Christ that the believer can truly find rest. Why so? Because He is the good Shepherd that provides spiritual food for all those that belong to Him. No wonder, this rather short Psalm can be seen as a summary of the entire gospel - from the invitation to believe in Him, to the ups and downs any believer will experience, up to the moment the believer will be made perfect in eternity.

Wolfgang Wegert delivered a series of sermons on Psalm 23. They have now been compiled and made available as a book that a broad reading audience can enjoy. It also makes an ideal gift to pass on to others.



ISBN 3-934936-07-5

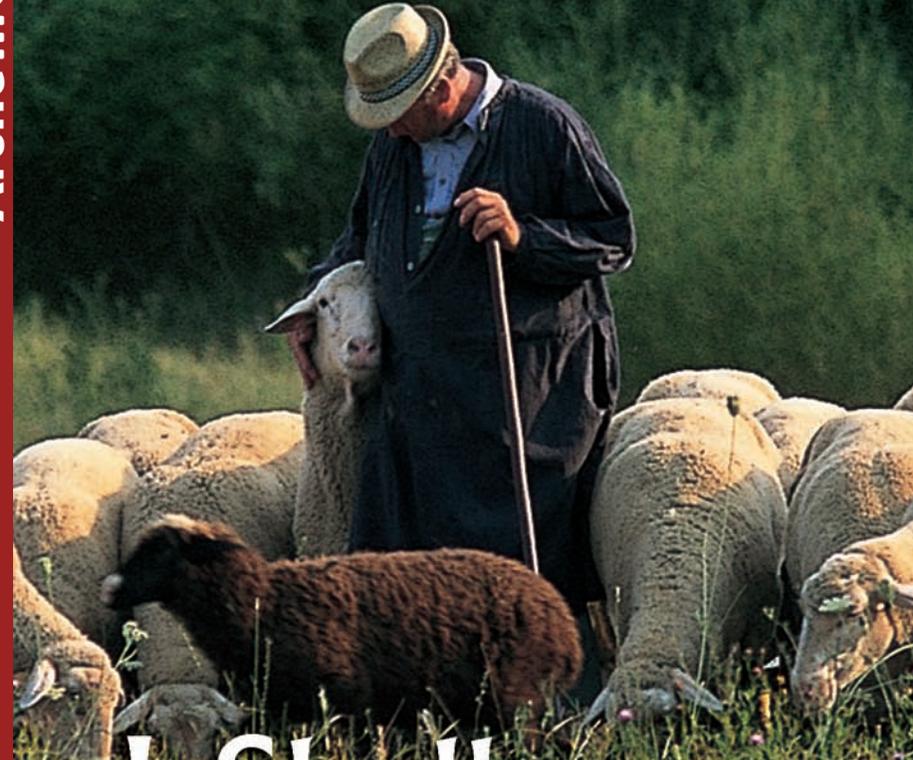
Arche
medien

„I Shall not Want“

Wolfgang Wegert



Wolfgang Wegert



I Shall not Want

Wolfgang Wegert

I shall not want

An interpretation of Psalm 23

arche-medien Hamburg

Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de>.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the Holy Bible: New International Version (NIV); other references are from the Authorized (King James) Version (KJV), Standard Text Edition.

first English edition 2004

© 2001 arche-medien Hamburg

Translators: Alex and Paulette Collings

Editor: Titus Vogt, Hamburg

Cover: BoD Verlagsservice, Hamburg

Print: ARKA, Cieszyn (Poland)

Title of the German original: Mir wird nichts mangeln: eine Auslegung des 23. Psalms

ISBN: 3-934936-07-5

arche-medien

– Verlag des Gemeinde und Missionswerkes ARCHE –

Doerriesweg 7

22525 Hamburg

 Germany +49 / 40 / 54 70 50

 Germany +49 / 40 / 54 70 52 99

www.arche-gemeinde.de

info@arche-gemeinde.de

Table of Contents

Foreword	4
The Lord Is My Shepherd	6
No Lack	11
Be At Rest.....	17
Come To The Source.....	22
On The Right Path	28
For God's Sake	33
I Fear No Evil	38
Sustenance in the valley	41
Comfort In The Darkness	44
The Set Table	50
The Feast Of Joy	56
Only God Is Good	61
Eternal Certainty	67
Book References	72

Foreword

Imagine this. You try your very best to procure an absolutely effective medicine for a sick person. Upon receiving it, this person would thank you very much, even speak very highly of the medicine, but guess what?! He would not use it!

This little story depicts the way people behave when they find the promises made in the Bible pleasant but fail to really believe what's written there. Certainly they acknowledge, to some extent, that the twenty-third Psalm is true and that, they, being the shepherd's sheep will not be in want. When push comes to shove, however, and the going gets tough, they become terribly scared all over again that they will lose out and be in need. In other words, they have much praise for the medication the Bible offers, but don't really use it. Their belief functions, in essence, in theory only, but in the reality of life's challenges it remains of no use. How can this be? The answer lies in the fact that their belief isn't built upon simple trust. They love the Biblical texts but these texts and verses remain no more than words that sound good. In so being, these people remain pacified but when the heat is turned up, the peace and quiet they felt take flight.

My plea therefore, to each reader, is this: Do not primarily learn the twenty-third Psalm by heart, but *believe* that what is written there is true. Ingest that psalm literally as medicine for your soul. Reflect upon its true meaning over and over again until it becomes a part of you, and just like an ongoing song in your heart, it will change your whole way of thinking.

Let's look at this example: Say you failed a major test twice already. Now, you are given one more opportunity to be successful. All your hope rests on this last chance. Your career, and even the very sustenance of your family is at

stake. You are aware of the enormous pressure and the doomsday feeling takes over. Obviously, what has happened here is that you have not been consequent in believing and applying the Psalm that reassures us that we'll **never** be in need, even when we fail. Chance is that we'll subsequently fall into the trap of panicing. In fear we get tense and fail the test. Why? It is so, because our eyes are set just on the successful outcome of that particular test. This is what we all too often focus on to prevent us from falling short. Psalm 23, however, does not say that success in life is the key to satisfying our needs, but that The good Shepherd is the One who does this. So when it becomes your intent to use the twenty-third Psalm to replenish your soul, depend on Jesus, only, to do this in your life, and not on the wish of fulfilling every dream you might have. This is when you can relax and leave it up to Jesus. Things like passing a test, winning back the love of your unfaithful husband, enjoying the best of health or the worry that folks will speak good of you, no longer take the preeminence in your life. The most important thing is that you believe that Jesus will make a way for you whether in good times or bad. At all times, He holds your future in His hands.

Trust the good Shepherd then, and let the truth of this Psalm seep into your heart and you will be able to see how much you can begin feeling at ease. Fears will melt away and your nervous tension will begin to dissipate.

Wolfgang Wegert

Hamburg, December 2001

The Lord Is My Shepherd¹

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

(Psalm 23:1)

David begins the twenty-third Psalm with these wonderful words. The person who is able to pray such a prayer not only confirms the fact that the Lord is his Shepherd, but at the same time, the fact that he is the Shepherd's sheep. The Bible, very often, compares the children of God to sheep. For example, the Bible says, *“Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture”* (Psalm 100:3). Using this contrast, God clearly allows us to see what kind of people true Christians are; hence the question, what are sheep like?

Sheep are helpless creatures

The first point to note, is that sheep are helpless creatures. If they get lost, they're just not able to find their way home alone. Other animals such as dogs, horses and pigeons, of course, often find their way home if they happen to get lost. A sheep, however, remains lost. This is why the child of God is able to confess his total dependence on God. People who seem to brim over with self-confidence, and believe that they can conquer life and even achieve eternal life by their own means, have got no comparison in character to the true Christian.

Quite the opposite is the case. The true child of God will be able to confess that without Christ he is lost and unable to escape the entanglement and bewilderment of sin. The child of God is like a lost sheep. He has reached the end of trying to do it alone, and is therefore unable to depend on himself anymore. Instead, he is now able to rely on the strength of his Shepherd. If you're at the end of your ropes

¹ Sermon from Nov 12nd 2000

and want to have Jesus as your Lord and Shepherd, then confess your utter helplessness to Him and pray this prayer: *“Jesus, Son of the living God, have mercy on me.”* These days people want to make you think that we will be conquerors if we simply believe in ourselves. It goes without saying that in such a case one does not need a Shepherd. Whoever humbly stretches out his hand to Christ however, can truly say: *“The Lord is my shepherd!”*

A gentle and peaceful nature

The second characteristic of a sheep that we want to look at is its gentle and peaceful nature. There are *so-called Christians* who are more like the wolf than the sheep in nature. If they're not tearing their neighbors to pieces, in essence, their speech is more like the howling of a wolf. They're always aggressive and ready for a fight. They haven't got the hooves of a sheep, but more the claws of a vulture. People like that snarl like a dog and growl like a bear; they're always dangerous. The person who isn't able to withstand an insult, but is always ready to strike back and is angry and bitter cannot be seen as a sheep belonging to Christ. God's sheep are peace-loving, gentle, and are more like their Savior. The Bible has this to say about them: *“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats ...”* (1 Peter 2:23). In another passage the Bible also states: *“I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.”* (Isaiah 50:6)

My wife and I love to go biking along the dikes of the coast of the German North Sea in the summer. There we can find numberless sheep grazing in harmony in the splendor of nature. What a wonderful picture this is to see! Once we came upon a scene while we biked, in which sheep were being shorn. As soon as the shearer got a hold of them, they

would immediately remain still. They would patiently allow the knife to glide over their skins without making a move. This reminds us of the words of the prophet Isaiah, who had this to say about Jesus: “... *yet he opened not his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent so he did not open his mouth*” (Isaiah 53:7). This kind of meekness is also to be seen in Christians. They don’t take revenge, but instead they forgive. They don’t hoard grievances in their hearts, but repay evil with good. They are friendly, and compassionate and will also love their enemies. They belong to the fold of Christ and can willingly proclaim: “*The Lord is my Shepherd*”. Is this the nature you have within you? If it isn’t, then simply ask God for it. Humbly ask Him to make you a sheep of His pasture.

Sheep do not eat just anything

A third characteristic of the sheep is that they do not like to eat just any and everything. A sheep would not touch what a wolf eats, for instance. It also wouldn’t eat what a pig eats. Sheep like to eat food that is pleasant and clean. Similarly, the sheep belonging to Christ’s fold do not feast upon just any food. They delight in eating food that is healthy for them and that, in this case, is the Word of God. “*When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my delight*” (Jeremiah 15:16). If a person who is a Christian finds himself delighting in reading literature, watching movies, listening to songs that glorify deeds of sin and shame, he cannot be God’s sheep. Because of the tastes he has, he will prove what spiritual binding he has.

People who are filled with the Holy Spirit will not like the kind of food the world has to offer. Their regenerated minds cannot take that. They are sheep of God’s pasture. They delight in His laws, and the Gospel of His saving grace. This is the green pastures of the Lord that they love.

All this distinguishes them as being Christ's, because they have accepted Him as their Shepherd.

The sheep knows the voice of the Shepherd

Yet another feature or characteristic of a sheep is the fact that it recognizes the voice of the shepherd. Jesus himself spoke about this very special attribute when He said: "*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me*" (John 10:27). Have you ever heard the voice of Christ? The question isn't about whether you've heard the voice of the pastor, priest or pope. The question I'm asking here is whether you have ever heard the voice of the Son of God. Has He ever spoken to you in such a way that you knew that He was the One who spoke? Have you ever heard the voice of God calling you by name? If you haven't, then I doubt whether you are of the fold belonging to Christ because they hear His voice.

How can one hear the voice of Jesus? Is it through the appearance of angels, dreaming dreams, having visions and seeing faces? This might be the case in some instances, but it is, by far, not the normal situation. This, on the other hand, is what normally happens: You have certainly heard of the suffering of Christ in our stead. However, there comes a time when this fact grips your heart, because suddenly you truly understand that His suffering was for you personally. The recognition of your sinful state appals you and you become aware of the righteous judgement that you face. You break down in the presence of God. This is when you realize that Jesus carried all your shame to the cross of Calvary for you. As a result of this, you accept and receive the redemption of Christ, and begin to understand the message written in the Bible which states: "*I am the good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep*" (John 10:11).

You might have heard this message once before, but now you understand these words Christ speaks to you, as you never have before. This is also when the words, “... *whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*” (John 5:24), becomes God’s personal promise to you. Whoever hears and believes, receives eternal life. They can truly shout: “*The Lord is my Shepherd.*”

When you become broken before God because of your sinful state, and realize that your life is condemned, that is the time God steps in and speaks to you as your Shepherd. At first, you will feel despair, and see no escape. You will begin asking yourself how you could ever escape God’s judgement. Then Jesus reveals His cross to you. That’s where He hung, as your Shepherd, for you. You’ll see the crown of thorns on His head and hear Him say, “I did this for you. I took all your shame to the cross. I hung where you should have been hanging.” That’s when you’ll suddenly recognize that He’s directly speaking to you.

So, dear friends, let the Gospel for Christ go forth. It is His will. He’s longing for everybody who once was not receptive to His call to now open their ears to hear Him speak. For it is Jesus who says: “... *whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life*” (John 5:24).

It is my prayer that God will reveal Himself through this message to reach those hearts that haven’t been able to welcome their good Shepherd yet and to hear Him speak as they never have before. I want to invite people to meet their good Shepherd and, as His sheep, begin following Him with all their hearts.

No Lack²

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

(Psalm 23:1)

When the Lord is our Shepherd, we can be comforted by the fact that we need not live in fear, because He takes care of His children in just the same way a good shepherd would take care of his sheep.

Practical living

The lifestyle that should become evident in the life of a Christian is the fact that he can live free of fear. This should apply to all areas of practical living. Due to the fact that we don't all experience this lifestyle similarly, let's take a look at Psalm 23:1, and reflect upon it for a while. We must first find out where fear comes from. Fear is a state of being afraid of losing something or being in need of something. It occurs as a result of the fact that one clings to something mentally, that one is scared of losing. One can be afraid of losing one's health, for instance. Other examples might be a fear of losing one's possessions, one's rights, one's honor or even one's life. Life's daily struggle becomes a continuous effort to hold on to what we have. Since we think we run the risk of losing what we have, the result is a life of anxiety.

However, if we have a good Shepherd who has promised that we'll never be in need, we will not have to fear. All we need to do is to trust Him whether we win or lose. He always takes care of us. Therefore Christians can enjoy living lives free of fear. That is the beauty of the Gospel; people who come to Christ leave behind a lifestyle of fear and enter into one of total security. One of the most important topics and commands within the Word of God says this:

² Sermon from Nov 12nd 2000

“Do not be afraid!” If people want to be free of fear, the answer is to be found in the Bible. This is what it basically says: “Believe the Gospel of Christ, accept Jesus; the Living Son of God as your Savior and Lord of your life. Deliver yourself into his Hands.”

Although we theoretically know this, we find it difficult to put this into practice. Don't we, over and over again, try to prevent the loss of what we own?! We are occupied with the fear of ever having to lose anything. We have left the good Shepherd remaining somewhere “at the back of the boat”, so-to-speak, and have left Him sleeping there as the story goes in that well-known account in the Bible. When we become aware, however, that Jesus is the essence of our lives, there will be no more need to fear. In his song, David says a few verses later: *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me ...”* (Psalm 23:4). David is not afraid because he has a good Shepherd and he will never be in need.

Some people might say that they have neither wealth, a spouse, honor nor do they command great respect. In short, they have nothing that they could lose, and yet they live in fear. If I should then ask why such people live in fear when they have nothing to lose, I receive such answers as: “What if my mind stops functioning one day? I'm afraid of that. You see, I'm not scared of other illnesses, but I would never want to lose my mind.” At such moments, I point out to them that just this fear is no other than the fear of losing what we possess. So it becomes evident that fear is really the fear of losing out, whether it's the fear of losing our minds, of not being loved, or of someone else leaving us and the resulting loneliness.

Total confidence

Someone once stated, “But Christians can also be found in a state of poverty, without jobs, and sick too. They also

are in need.” Let me shed some light on the secret of what a Christian’s relationship with the Lord is all about. The secret is about absolute trust and total confidence. In their hearts, the children of God have delivered all that they are and have into the hands of Jesus. They are aware that all that they are and all that they have, has been entrusted to them for just a short time span. That is a foundational truth that has been revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. We tend to think, “my wife belongs to me, my children belong to me, my house belongs to me, it’s my life!” That’s also why we hear so much talk about our rights and what we are entitled to.

The Bible however, teaches us that everything has been given to us by the grace of God, and is entrusted to us only for a time. We are God’s stewards. If it pleases God to retrieve what He has placed at our disposal for a period of time, then He is rightfully performing what is His own sovereign will. In so doing, He simply reclaims what He has entrusted to us. The Lord lends it to us and He has a right to reclaim it at any time He wishes to. So Christians consciously entrust all, and I mean all they have, into the hands of their good Shepherd. They give their lives to Him, for Him to possess it and to use it to His own disposal, because they know that God has their best interests at heart. They are certain of the fact that, “*all things work together for good to them that love God ...*” (Romans 8:28 KJV). They also know that the Lord says this: “*For I know the plans I have for you,*” declares the Lord, “*plans to prosper you and not to harm you ...*” (Jeremiah 29:11). The fact that they know that their interests are in good hands allows them to relax.

Some time ago a bank came up with an attention-grabbing commercial. The slogan they used said, “Entrust your wealth to us, and just sit back and relax!” With this, they offered their trustee services and tried to get their cli-

ents to consider leaving it up to them to regulate the tedious and time-consuming job of having to manage their possessions. I like the sentence, “Just sit back and relax.” Entrust God with all your circumstances, your wealth or your poverty. Leave your family, health or sickness to Him. Let Him take care of everything. Just relax. Such trust ensures a splendid quality of life and frees us from fear.

In response to those people who are afraid of losing control of their minds, bear this in mind: You have no rights to a brain that functions all the time. Therefore, hand this concern, along with all others you might have, to God. They’re His business. If God in His wisdom has ordained you to walk the path of one whose brain will be impaired, just say as Job did: *“The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21 KJV).*

It is a sin to cling to things that have only been given to our care, to hold on to things that don’t rightfully belong to us. Once you understand this, you will also deliver the fear you have of losing control of your mind, into the hands of God. Instead of being afraid of encountering any brain impairment, you will be thankful that you have had the joy of possessing a healthy one for such a long time. This is when you can join the songwriter in singing this paraphrase of a well-known German song “TAKE MY INTELLECT AND USE EVERY POWER AS THOU SHALT CHOOSE”³ This state of complete surrender will free you from your fears. What lack and what loss should you be afraid of when you’ve done this? You don’t own anything anymore after you’ve delivered it all to Jesus. Jesus once said, *“Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it” (Luke 17:33).*

³ To be found in the German songbook called „Pfingstjubiläum“ Nr. 320

Let go and enjoy life!

Choose between the following truths. One says, „**Hold fast and die!**“ and the other says, „**Let go and enjoy life!**“ I'd advise you to choose the latter option. You can relax wonderfully, knowing that you're on the heart of your good Shepherd and let Him take care of you. Let Him have your past, your future, your family, your sickness and every other care you possess.

Leave all the sins others have committed against you to God also. Just let them go away. Don't contend about yourself, but trust your good Shepherd.

Jim Elliot, who lost his life while being on the mission-field, wrote the following in his diary: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose”.⁴ So be also prepared to lose what you're unable to keep and which will pass away anyway. That's when you will win the eternal that you will never lose. The Psalmist sang: “*Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you*” (Psalm 73:25). Let Jesus alone be happiness and fulfillment in your life and the fear of lack will not devour you anymore. The Bible states that all fullness dwells in Jesus, (Colossians 1:19) Take the Lord as your Shepherd and you will lack nothing, even when you are poor, you are indeed rich, because you'll be able to live a satisfying and fulfilling life.

Concerning our spiritual life

We need not be fearful regarding our spiritual lives also, when Christ is our Shepherd. What applies to our physical lives, also applies to our spiritual lives. Many people are concerned about the fact that they haven't done enough to be called blessed. They are aware of their failure, spiritu-

⁴ Elisabeth Elliot. *Shadow of the Almighty – Life & Testament of Jim Elliot*. Harper: San Francisco, 1989: page 14 (first published in 1958)

ally, before God and are afraid that one day they will be condemned. People who live with such fears are either those who do not know Christ as their good Shepherd or those who don't really trust Him to be their good Shepherd. When you truly have Him as your personal Savior however, you won't be in fear of need in any way because the Lord is your Shepherd and you will lack nothing. Amen.

Be At Rest⁵

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ...” (Psalm 23:2)

The twenty-third Psalm also shows us how the good Shepherd meets the needs of His sheep. He does this by leading us to green pastures and also beside quiet waters. The picture of the green pastures and quiet waters that is painted here is meant to show us the fullness of the care He lavishes on us. Let us first concentrate on the green pastures. In what do we see the proof of its fullness?

Grass grows back

Every owner of a garden knows that he or she has to mow the lawn again and again, because grass grows back rather quickly. This on-going growth process is something that benefits the sheep, and so ensures that there isn't a lack of food. The same is true for us Christians. Our source of spiritual food never runs out. Our “grass” is the Word of God. We find this truth in verses like: *“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight ...”* (Jeremiah 15:16).

Ezekiel reports of the case in which God gave him His word to eat in the form of a scroll on which His Words had been written. The prophet says, *“... so I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth”* (Ezekiel 3:3). With this we have the evidence that the Bible declares the Word of God to be spiritual food. Hence, we can then compare the green pastures of the sheep with that of the Word of Truth. For those people who belong to the fold of Christ, their desire is to feast upon the Holy Scriptures and to be filled in just the same way the green grass is refreshing for the sheep and remains one thing they enjoy eating. That is why Christians

⁵ Sermon from Nov 26th 2000

are captivated by the Bible. They love the Word of God more than anything else. It is their daily intake of food and it replenishes them. Christians who find that they don't feel like reading the Word of God, must have gotten an upset stomach somewhere, otherwise the Scriptures would have been a joy for them to feast upon.

They behave like sick sheep that are unwilling to eat from the healthiest of pastures. Are they Christians at all? If they aren't, then they are more like wolves. Does a wolf feel like eating grass? If he eats grass any at all, then it would be that he is forced to do so. This also describes the case of a person who has to be forced to feed upon the Word of God, who doesn't belong to the fold of Christ. To that person it is repugnant, therefore, he just cannot find pleasure in reading the word of God. Instead he retreats from such activities.

The pasture of Truth

It is known that grass grows again, but how is the Word of God replenished? Let's take a look at the pasture of Truth. The people of God often know the teachings and promises by heart, that are found in the Word of God. We have read and seen them so many times that they might even appear as grass that has been overgrazed. There comes a time however, when just these words take on great meaning, especially in difficult times such as times of loneliness. That's when you might stumble across Psalm 23, that long-forgotten Psalm of your Sunday school days. You read "*The Lord is my Shepherd*", and suddenly the tiny word "**my**" takes on a whole new meaning. This sentence just speaks to your heart as it has never done before. You don't understand it as saying, "The Lord is a Shepherd" or "The Lord is our Shepherd", but it says clearly, "*The Lord is **my** Shepherd*". You shout for joy because the Truth of these words become clear to you. The pastures of the Word

of God have literally have sprung to life again for you. They become real, full of life and new to you.

The pasture of Grace

During the season of grazing, the good Shepherd will allow His sheep to change fields. He will lead them, for example, from the field of Truth to the field of Grace. After a truth has anchored itself in our hearts and has nourished our souls, we are led to another pasture that will fill and strengthen us.

I can personally testify to the fact that the pasture of Grace has become a very new and refreshing blessing for me. At first I thought that the grace of God would take effect in my life if I knowingly accepted it. I repented and thought that it was by doing so that I received forgiveness. I turned to God and thought that it was by doing this that God accepted me. I thought I was the one who had to initiate the grace of God in my life. I was persuaded that the following pattern was the right one to follow: I behave well, and in so doing, the grace of God will be stimulated and set in motion. This type of grace tasted pleasant to me. I was blessed and fed upon this grace.

However, one day I made a new discovery. The grass of Grace grew again. I came to recognize a dimension of grace, much deeper than I had ever seen before. I realized that it wasn't me who set it in motion, but it was Grace itself that set me in motion. I wasn't the one who stirred myself and then grace took effect, but grace took effect first and thus stirred me. I realized that it was Grace that brought me to repentance, to turning from sin, and caused me to believe. I wasn't the one who accomplished this. Let me compare this precious nugget of truth with the well-known story of the hedgehog and the hare. The hare ran, and ran, and ran, but the hedgehog was always at the finishing line before him no matter how much the hare tried. This is the ex-

perience I had with the grace of God. I ran, and ran, and thought I must set the Grace of God in motion, but that Grace was always there before me. It took effect first, which is why Jesus said, “*You did not choose me, but I chose you ...*” (John 15:16). God chose us in Christ “*before the creation of the world ...*” (Ephesians 1:4).

This means that Grace was there even before I was born, and before I could activate it in any way. Grace was initiated and took effect as a blessing to me and as healing for me even before the world was made. I really feasted on this truth and found pleasure in it. This completely new dimension of Grace overwhelmed me. Like grass, it had grown again as lush as ever, and my soul could feast, just as John puts it in the Gospel, “*From the fullness of his grace, we have received one blessing after another*” (John 1:16). Grace never stops growing just like the green pastures that Jesus leads us to. What a joy to be able to experience this!

A place for settling down

The fullness of lush pastures blesses us in more than just one way. Not only does it grow back repeatedly but also, it provides a place for settling down for the sheep. When we go hiking out-doors, the place we love to choose the most for a picnic is a meadow. We would hardly choose a spot where the ground has been plowed, where there are stones on the ground or where there is asphalt even. We always look for a meadow.

If we look back at the text in the 23rd Psalm, we can also see it as saying, “He makes me lie down in a place where I can settle down”. Suddenly I discovered new truth in the verse: The sheep eat the grass of the field first and then they lie down to rest on the same pasture. Sheep chew their cud. They can rest, all snug and comfy, satisfied and happy on the pasture and digest their food. Isn't this just the way we can picture the children of God doing it? First they feed on

the Word of God and then, they rest upon the promises made therein. *“There remaineth, therefore, a rest to the people of God” (Hebrews 4:9 KJV)*. We can come to rest within the Word of God. The penalty for sin is absent and the forgiveness of sins is abundant. The promises that God will never desert us are ours to keep and the privilege we have of being His children is sure. What a pasture of Grace!

John writes: *“No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him ...” (1 John 3:9)*. The seed of the nature of God remains in God’s children. That’s why the love of sin stops, we are healed, and live changed lives. A Christian is no longer the old person. Why? This is because he has God’s immortal seed in him. The sheep that are at rest on these magnificent pastures, are full of abundant joy because of the love of God; they rejoicingly proclaim: *“What shall separate us from the love of Christ? ... I am convinced that nothing shall be able to separate us ...” (Romans 8:35, 38-39 KJV)*. Also: *“We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him” (1 John 5:18)*. Christ’s sheep don’t fight for themselves anymore, but they are now at rest on the green pastures of God’s love and on the promise that He will never leave them. Their fears of getting lost are over, because they can trust in the sure protection of their good Shepherd.

Come To The Source⁶

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.” (Psalm 23:2)

First eat, then drink

When we take a further look at this Psalm we notice that sheep are fed first, then they're allowed to drink. The second part of the verse says, *“... he leads me beside quiet waters”* (Psalm 23:2). Very close to the pastures, we often find a container of water, or there will be a stream that flows by. In just the same way as the green pasture symbolizes the spiritual food and is identified as the Word of God, the fresh water represents the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, *“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the spirit whom those who believed in him were later to receive”* (John 7:38-39). No human being can live without water, and no spiritually regenerated person can live without the Holy Spirit. Christians live by the fresh water of the Holy Spirit. Without Him there would be no Christians and no faith in God either. David prayed when he had realized this: *“Do not ... take your Holy Spirit from me”* (Psalm 51:11). It also says, *“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God”* (Psalm 42:1).

If the good Shepherd doesn't lead us to fresh water, we wouldn't survive. Our souls need the Holy Spirit, just as our bodies need water. Jesus is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and He is the one who gives us to drink of the Holy Spirit who is the Living Water of Life. This truth is powerful. This is what John, the Baptist says: *“I baptize you with water, but after me will come one ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit ...”* (Matthew 3:11). How does Jesus give water to His Church?

⁶ Sermon from Nov 26th 2000

Jesus begins with the Word

He begins with the Word. The Word of Truth which can be understood as the green grass of the pasture, is compared here with water: “... *no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit*” (John 3:5). The water is the Word. Juicy grass contains a lot of water. So when God intends to impart the Holy Spirit to a person, He starts by using His Word. Whenever He gives His Word, He delivers the Holy Spirit with it. Jesus states: “*The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life*” (John 6:63).

The Bible explains that, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” (John 1:1) So God doesn't only speak His word, He is the Word. Jesus, too, is the Word; the Word that became flesh. We also read: “*God is spirit ...*” (John 4:24). If God is the Word and at the same time He is the Spirit, then the Word is also Spirit. That's why Scripture speaks of the living Word. “*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword ...*” (Hebrews 4:12). Here, we can grasp a bit of what the secret of the triune God is all about.

So we are born again to new life by the living Word of God. This is the Word of the Holy Spirit that penetrates our souls. One could also call it the ‘Spirit Word’. It brings new life from God to us. So God waters his sheep in that He feeds us with the fresh, living Word and by so doing we receive the Spirit.

Jesus leads us onward

Jesus leads us further. He leads us to the watering troughs. The sheep are led from the field to the source of fresh water. Why? Although every word of God means life and spirit for the believers, there are some truths that are relatively difficult to understand. We can think of the ex-

ample previously mentioned, about the Trinity of God. How can all three entities exist as one? How can the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be one and not three Gods. No-one can really understand that.

There are many other questions. One more we could look at would be the righteousness of God and His free choice in offering grace. We read in Scripture: “*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*” (Romans 9:13). So is God unjust? That’s the age-old question that has been asked, even at the time of the apostle Paul (Romans 9:14). Or take the return of Christ, and even the last book of the Bible – the Revelations –, these are some of the issues even believers wrestle with. There is a lot in the Bible that is difficult to digest. On top of that, we even get thirsty after we read them! At such a time, the Lord supplies us with fresh water along with such a heavy meal.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit

What is that supposed to mean? It is clear that the Holy Spirit gives inspiration, knowledge, instruction and anointing. This means He teaches and explains the Word of Truth, and more often than not, He does this even to those who have a hard time learning. This is what the ministry of the Holy Spirit is all about. We experience these special instructions He reveals, deep within, like an immersion, a filling and like a revelation. We become overwhelmed with the revelation of truth, and filled with a sense of the presence of God. These are glorious moments. When the Shepherd leads us to refreshing waters, our encounter with the Word becomes more than just a common-place experience of just hearing alone. It becomes an eventful occasion that resembles more of a baptism and refreshes that person. Hence we see the connection with the picture of the Water.

Another person will experience this encounter with the living Word as a warm fire. Here we see the link with the

Fire of the Holy Spirit also. Still, for another child of God, the Word becomes an experience of inner strengthening when the declared Truth is suddenly revealed to him. And so the Holy Spirit becomes power and strength for serving God. Some people will even start speaking in tongues. No one can explain this event, but it flows out from an inner source because a very special anointing of God reaches us through His Word. The Holy Spirit gives more enlightenment so we can understand the Scriptures, digest them, and become one with Him, thus making us able to live by this Source. This is truly a reason to be full of gladness and rejoicing!

The Bible calls such supernatural processes, amongst others, “*the baptism of the Holy Spirit*”⁷, “*the filling*”, or the “*anointing of the Holy Spirit*”⁸. It also calls it “*being sealed by the Holy Spirit*”⁹. This doesn’t happen just once, but over and over again (Ephesians 5:18). So it’s not just this one time that we are led to the water, but over and over again.

Sometimes we experience this magnificent encounter with the refreshing Water even stronger and filled with more blessing. Another time it will happen very modestly and unspectacular, but it will always be a baptizing and filling of the Holy Spirit.

The Psalmist says, “*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet [or: still] waters.*” A child of God rests and remains on this majestic pasture and enjoys the promises God has given him. God stirs the Christian’s heart with this truth and he is made to rest in His love and faithfulness. The sheep of Christ trust in the security of their good Shepherd, and all fear will flee. Don’t you want to rest on the pastures of the good Shepherd, too?

⁷ Matthew 3:11; Acts 1:5; 11:16; 1 Corinthians 12,13

⁸ Luke 1:15; Acts 2:4; 4:31; 9:17; 10:28; 13:52

⁹ Luke 1:15; Acts 2:4; 4:31; 9:17; 10:28; 13:52

The Holy Spirit remains

In the King James version of the Bible, Psalm 23:2 is quoted as saying, “*He leadeth me beside the still waters*”. Actually, it should be translated to say “*the water of rest*”. This presents a picture for the truth Jesus taught in *John 14:16 (KJV)*: “... and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever”. When Jesus leads His people to the water of rest, He leads them to God who dwells in them now that they are born-again, and makes them aware of His presence. That’s why Jesus said to the Samaritan: “*But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life*” (*John 4:14*).

The filling of the Holy Spirit is sometimes understood to mean that He has to be poured into our hearts over and over again because our hearts are like a sieve. The Bible uses this image also, to illustrate the fact that we are dependent on the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit in us is never depleted. It is not like a car that runs out of gas and needs to be refilled. If this was the case, Jesus could never have said, “*He will abide with you forever!*” This means that after you’ve been filled with the Holy Spirit, He lives and stays with you forever.

Sometimes life will seem like an uphill battle; cares torment you and worries overwhelm you. The Spirit might even lead you to the pasture to feed on food that you find way too difficult to digest. So you will long for answers and solutions. It is at times like these that the Holy Spirit springs to action and teaches you. In such situations you will recognize the answers God has for you in His Holy Word. And no doubt, the Spirit of God has also been alive in the Scripture that you haven’t been able to comprehend at first. Sometimes He will lead us to the Water so that the Spirit of God will be able to “bubble and brim over” just

like the water in a whirlpool. At such times you are refreshed, your joy runs over and you are reassured by the Spirit that He lives within you.

Let me use marriage to drive my point home to you. I have now been married for over 30 years and my wife and I enjoy our marriage, but there are moments when we are especially filled with love for each other. Therefore, allow me to make an appeal to everyone who has been married for a longer time already: “It’s time to be filled with the bond of love that brought you together in the first place. Let the love that you daily have for one another, bubble and flow over!” In the same way I want to state: “Be filled with the Holy Spirit who lives in you!” Whenever the Holy Spirit personally instructs us concerning the promises and truths found in the Word of God, we can view that as a special time of joy and Godly indwelling. It is as if pure water fills our hearts.

Through the Words of the Holy Scriptures, we are born unto a living hope; we receive the Holy Spirit. We find within us a Holy Source that bubbles over and leads us into everlasting life in just the same way Jesus explains it in John 7:38. This source wells up and flows higher, filling our hearts with delight, with love, with strength and the boldness to witness to others, and with gifts and devotion. That’s powerful.

And so the Holy Spirit lives within the lives of the children of God. He leads us to green pastures, and also to fresh water so that what we have fed on can be digested, and the food or the Word takes effect in our lives. The Lord allows the love that has grown cold to be enflamed again, because He rekindles the flame of faith that grows dim. If you are thirsty, come to the Source of Life. Jesus invites you to a new refreshing.

On The Right Path¹⁰

“He restores my soul. He guides me in the path of righteousness for his name sake.”
(Psalm 23:3)

The next topic we want to look at in Psalm 23, is the restoration of our souls.

The restoration of the soul

I very well remember a hike we went on with some teenagers. We had gotten lost deep in a forest and already it was dusk. Night was about to fall. We ran to and fro, backwards and forwards, and had utterly lost our orientation. I must admit that I was very worried at this point. I wondered how we would find our way out. How would we get back on the right path? We walked on and on and on. Then, all on a sudden, we found ourselves on the right path again. We were truly relieved. It was a fantastic feeling to leave our fears behind and be back to safety.

The good Shepherd restores His sheep also by leading them back to the right path when they have lost their way. If we were to translate Psalm 23:3 precisely, we would be able to define what sort of restoration is spoken of here. We could use the words: *“He leads my soul back and guides me on the path of righteousness.”* We could also use the word *convert*. This would express it the way the Hebrew original puts it: *“He converts my soul and guides me on the path of righteousness.”*

Christians are quite like sheep. They go astray, they wander off of the track God has set them on, they tread on dangerous grounds and depart from the right path and directions the living God has set for them, which is the straight and narrow way. Sheep have got to be careful to

¹⁰ Sermon from Dec 10th 2000

stay on the right path especially in mountainous regions, otherwise they run the risk of falling over dangerous brinks.

As we know, King David was familiar with the experience of leaving the right path of truth when he disregarded the laws of God. He had committed adultery with Batsheba. We find the account in 2 Samuel 11. As king, he even went as far as to ensure that her husband would be slain by deliberately putting him at risk of being killed in battle. That way, he gained exclusive rights to the man's wife. Such an act was a great sin, a sorrowful deviation from the path of truth. Nevertheless, despite the pleasures of sin he enjoyed at first, he carried a great burden on his heart. David describes his resulting depression in Psalm 32 like this: "*When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer*" (Psalm 32:3-4). This wasn't a time of restoration. Because of his sin, King David could find no peace.

When we leave the path God sets us on, there is pleasure and lustful desire only in the beginning. If we look at the long-term consequences, we see self-destruction affecting us both spiritually and physically. In actuality, such occasions bring great burden and misery; it's a state of imprisonment and fear as we can see happening to David.

God, in His grace, led and restored David as we have read in Psalm 23. We all know the Biblical account of the fact that God sent the prophet Nathan to him, who exposed the sin for what it was. In Psalm 32:5 we read, "*Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" – and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*" At the beginning of the Psalm, we read: "*Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit*" (Psalm 32:2). The forgiveness of sins paves the way to a great restoration and quality of life. The Bible says: "We

all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). We imagine that we are on the right path, but the truth of the matter is that we are lost. I’m speaking to people who aren’t living in obedience to God, and the love of the Lord. I’m speaking to those who backslide, and disregard the law of God and are on the path that leads to destruction. My friend, this Psalm is not meant to “charm” us. It is the Word of God that can divide asunder the bone and marrow, and the soul and spirit. The Psalmist isn’t asking for a gentle pat from God, but is saying, “Lead me back my God. Lead me once more to the path of Your righteousness. Then it will be well with my soul again.” If you want it to be well with your soul again, then call on God just like David did: “Forgive me my transgressions, my sins and my faults. Lead me back once more, let me walk on the path of Your righteousness.” This will result in God’s restoring of your soul and healing of your heart. It will calm your conscience and eventually also your nerves. It will not only be good for your mind, but also your body.

Walking on the right path

“He guides me in the paths of righteousness” (Psalm 23:3). Many people understand the interpretation of this passage as merely saying that they’ll have a type of emotional leading in various decision-making processes. They presume, for instance, that this means a plea for God’s help in making the right decision for an apartment, or finding the right job. What it says though, is this: *“He guides me in the paths of righteousness.”* What it signifies then, is walking in the ordinances of the Lord. Therefore, what David points out here is that the good Shepherd would lead him in the ways of God and not in making the decision as to which path might be the right one to take in his life. So what does *“in the paths of righteousness”* actually mean? The Bible teaches us that Christ has been made righteousness for us (1 Corinthians 1:30). He is the path of righteousness. He is the

Way (John 14:6). In obedience, He has fulfilled the principles of God, while we have only failed. This is why the right question in life isn't "how can I become rich?", or "how can I live longer?", but **„how can I be righteous before God?“** In His righteousness, the Holy God will make a path of righteousness for us, not because He wants to destroy us, but because He is the very essence of righteousness. When we live in unrighteousness, we are already destroyed because we have left the path He has set for us.

On top of all this, our problem is that we have left the path of righteousness, and are not able to find our way back. Despite his good intentions and efforts, it is impossible for mankind to return to this path on his own. The Psalmist is aware of this and pleads: "Lord, lead me back." And God does just that! He makes us righteous because we believe in Christ. A person will not find his way back to God on his own. Many might say, "I'm going to make an effort to walk on the path of righteousness that God wants me to walk on. I will manage it by living an obedient lifestyle." "My friend, this is the beginning of disaster. We all know that New Year resolutions don't even last till the end of January 1. But praise be to God, you can look to Jesus Christ to find the righteousness God desires. In the message of the Gospel you'll see that Christ imparts righteousness to those who believe on Him."

God changes our lives

The fact that God imparts the righteousness of Christ to us is not at all to be viewed as a theoretical state only. The wonderful thing is that the fruits of this righteousness that springs from our belief in Jesus is also a righteousness of a practical manner. In other words, the life and nature of a person who believes in Jesus is transformed.

A Christian who is walking on the path of righteousness lives the law of God. He loves the instructions Jesus gave in

“the Sermon on the Mount”. They will love the letters written by the apostles because “*The precepts of the lord are right, giving joy to the heart*” (Psalm 19:8). This is why I invite you to examine your ways anew, and see if you have left the path of righteousness. Look to Jesus and believe on Him. Believe that He is your righteousness and you will walk the path that He has already paved for you.

For God's Sake¹¹

“He restores my soul. He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.”
(Psalm 23:3)

Why does the good Shepherd restore us? Why does God lead us in the path of righteousness? The answer should not be: Because we have earned it. Instead, the correct answer is found at the end of the verse in Psalm 23 – *“For His name’s sake.”*

For His name's sake

This is a small section of the verse that is, all too often, overlooked, but remains very important. The words, *“for his name’s sake”*, teach us that God does not bless us because we have earned it. What reasons has God got for saving a sinner? Such a person doesn’t believe, he is persistent in his rejection of God, he goes against the laws of his Creator, he lives a life of unrighteousness, he despises the One who came to save him, and tramples on the salvation He offers. There is nothing good in him. In his transgressions and due to his unbelief, the sinner offers God reason after reason for condemning and judging him. If God didn’t do things for His own sake, He would have to wipe such perverse lawbreakers as us, off the face of the earth. God has had a right to curse the earth because of us, human beings, and our sinful ways, as we can read in the account of the flood in Genesis 6:9. But for the sake of His holy Name, He has once more blessed us. What grace! God has placed His symbol in the clouds above; the rainbow (Genesis 9:12-13). He hasn’t done this to please us because we were so good, valuable and precious, but for His own honor. He established a covenant with us for the sake of His holy name. If it had been for our sake, He would have had

¹¹ Sermon from Dec 10th 2000

to condemn us, but for His sake He had mercy and has blessed us. Once again, what grace!

This is the exact way God says it through the prophet Ezekiel: *“It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned ...”* (Ezekiel 36:22). God is moved to be compassionate therefore, not because of anything good in us human beings. Nothing good comes from us, that could cause God to be gracious to us. What we display could indeed only lead to His wrath. God isn’t gracious to us because we are so good or worthy or because we are so much to be pitied. No, God’s love and mercy don’t happen on account of anything we have done, but only due to His own goodness. For His name’s sake, He leads us in the path of righteousness and brings us back when we go astray.

God's name – God's character

When the name of God is mentioned in the Bible, it relates to His character. The expression “for His name’s sake” can be understood as a synonym for His nature and His character. His name expresses His nature. This expression “for His name’s sake” leaves a red trail throughout the Bible. Here are a few:

“For my own name’s sake I delay my wrath; for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you, so as not to cut you off. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another” (Isaiah 48:9,11).

“You will know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name’s sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, O house of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord” (Ezekiel 20:44).

“For the sake of your own name, O Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great” (Psalm 25:11)

“Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name’s sake.”(Psalm 79:9).

Let’s look at Jeremiah 14:7, *“Although our sins testify against us, O Lord, do something for the sake of your name. For our backsliding is great; we have sinned against you.”*

Or Jeremiah 14:21, *“For the sake of your name do not despise us; do not dishonour your glorious throne. Remember your covenant with us and do not break it.”* The prophet appeals to God not to break His covenant, not because the believer has earned that right, but because of God’s credibility about the promises He made, and for the sake of His integrity and reliability. God sealed His covenant with an oath, that we who believe, would be His for time and eternity. We can depend on this oath for the sake of His name, because it is backed up by nothing less than His holy name.

Praying the right way

Let us, therefore, pray believing. Let us not pray carnally. Don’t pray: “Lord, save me, help me, hear me, because I am praying so earnestly, because I fast so much, because I serve you and I’m so faithful to you and my belief is so strong.” Don’t pray in this way either: “Lord, help me because I’m so poor and sick.” While you pray, don’t look for reasons why God should intervene. Pray instead as we see those pray in the Bible: “Lord, save me for the sake of Your long-suffering, because of Your goodness, because of Your promises, because of Your love and for the sake of Your holy name.” This is a wonderful prayer that is well-pleasing in the sight of God. The prayers found in the Bible are similar. In Psalm 109:21, for example, we read, *“But you, O Sovereign Lord, deal well with me for your name’s*

sake; out of the goodness of your love, deliver me.” John complements this in 1 John 2:12 when he states, *“I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.”* We see, therefore, that this subject can be found all the way from the Old to the New Testament. This is how the Lord’s prayer also begins; with the glorification of the Name of God (Matthew 6:9). Glorify the name, the character, the nature of the living God, firstly, when you pray.

When dealing with other people

Also when we deal with other people, our intentions should be, first and foremost, with God’s will in mind. The human nature tries to focus on itself primarily. It sees itself as the highest. This is why we hear so often that human dignity is inviolable. Nothing is placed higher. It is certainly a good motivating factor, to do good for the sake of mankind.

But Christians do not, first and foremost, do good for the sake of mankind, but for the sake of Christ. This is yet a higher motivating factor. Despite everything, humans trample upon the dignity of their neighbors so much. We experience people violating the dignity of each other around the world. The doctrine pertaining to the dignity of mankind hasn’t taken root in the first instance. The idea of human dignity falls short, simply because we have left God out of the picture. If the dignity of God has been trampled on, what do we expect to happen to human dignity?

When the dignity of God has been re-established among human beings, and His name is seen as being holy once more, then, and only then will we respect each other. That’s when oppression, abuse, and murder will become less prevalent. That’s why the Bible teaches us that God is highest and not mankind. He is to be honored above all.

Once a daughter was disinherited by her mother. She was so angry about this, that she decided never to concern herself with her mother again. When her mother got old and sickly, the daughter stuck to her decision. One day, however, she gave her life to Christ. Her way of thinking was changed, and she said to herself, "I won't take care of her for her sake, but for Christ's sake." What a wonderful reason to do so! What a wonderful display of love for others!

It is possible to do good, for the sake of the name of Jesus, even to the point of loving our enemies. We can accomplish this just from the mere fact that He loves us, and because of His patience, His goodness and His mercy toward us. Bless those that curse you. Do good to those who insult you; not for their sake, but for the sake of honoring Christ and His holy name.

Go to work, not just to receive a pay nor to please your boss, but be diligent for the sake of honoring God. Love your spouse, not just for the sake of your spouse, nor for your own sake, but for the sake of Jesus. This will ensure that your marriage will succeed. Love your children and your parents, not just for their sake but for the sake of the name of God. Love them because you honor God.

May God help you walk the path of righteousness for His name's sake! Amen.

I Fear No Evil¹²

“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.”
(Psalm 23:4)

David must have certainly thought of his days as a shepherd boy when he wrote Psalm 23. How often he must have walked through the valley of the shadow of death when he took the sheep from their winter abode to the highlands early in the year, so they could find good food. The paths to the hills often led through deep valleys. These valleys were wide enough and allowed a less arduous climb than the steep mountain trails. This was the way they overcame the ascent. David knew how uncomfortable it could get in such valleys. It was often wet, cold and dark, because the sun, often, didn't reach the ground of such a ravine. The words, *“even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”*, is exact in its description.

David also knew of the dangers that lurked in the dark valleys. There were oftentimes such animals as bears and wolves on the prowl. Because the sheep had to walk very close together, there were no chances to flee. The Bible reports that David fought with bears and lions (1 Samuel 17:37). Apart from that, they sometimes experienced dangers from falling stones.

The only way: The way through the valley

The question is, why did the shepherd take the path that led through the valley if it was dangerous and uncomfortable? The answer is simple. There were no others. Only such a path was available.

In a similar way, as Christians, we find ourselves on such a path that leads to the highlands. The highlands to

¹² Sermon from Jan 21st 2001

which David ascended with his sheep, can certainly be compared to our association with God, as His children. An old German chorus puts it this way: “TAKE ME HIGHER TO THE HILLS, IN FELLOWSHIP WITH YOU ALONE ...”¹³. This was also David’s desire.

We are not exempt either, from taking the perilous path David had to take, that led through the valley. We have no possibility of taking a short cut. We can’t climb the sheer mountain side or reach the top with a helicopter. We have to go through the dark and the cold of the ravine as David did.

When you’re on the way that leads to your Shepherd above, don’t be astonished, dear Christian, when you come upon difficulties and troubles with which you have to struggle. Sufferings, setbacks, disappointments, and sadness are normal things that a Christian experiences. The person who doesn’t go through the damp, dark and oppressive valleys cannot make it to the top.

David didn’t report that he had to go through the valley as an exception. No, he expected to go through it. We read, “*even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ...*” This is the experience every Christian has. We are reminded of this fact in the second verse of another well-known German song, JESUS GO BEFORE ME: “FOR IT IS THROUGH TRIALS HERE ON EARTH THAT THE PATH LEADS TO YOU”¹⁴

It is also in the Bible that it says, “*we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*” (Acts 14:22). So there is no other way that leads to heaven than the one through the valley. If you have not had to suffer trials and predicaments lately, see it as coming from God’s hand. Be sure to recognize the fact, that the way that leads to heaven

¹³ To be found in the German songbook called „Pfingstjubiläum“ No. 280

¹⁴ To be found in the German songbook called „Pfingstjubiläum“ No. 533

is meant to lead us through dark and narrow paths, but that Jesus is always with us. *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”*

Sustenance in the valley

There is, yet another reason why the shepherds lead their flock of sheep through valleys and ravines to the top of the hills. These paths don't only have a relatively easy grade. There is, often also, a supply of water, hence there is food for the climb. A shepherd needs time to go through a dark and narrow valley. It will seem as if he's taking very long, sometimes, before he reaches his destination. That's why it is good to know that fresh water is in the valley. Don't be surprised, therefore, if you find yourself in the valley often. Find comfort in the fact that, especially there, you'll find Living Water flowing from heaven. In this way, the uncomfortable, dark and dangerous valley will become a blessing.

We can translate this to our spiritual life. It is, especially, in the dark valleys of life that the Lord restores us. To be precise, we'll always find fresh water there. We can be sure and consoled by the fact that our good Shepherd is always near when we face the darkest hour. Some people assert, when they find themselves in terribly trying times, that they can't rise above them. Christians, however, experience that it is just in these crises that God wonderfully refreshes and restores them.

With this, we have shed a bit of light on the reason David had for writing the verse we're dealing with today, allowing us to see how he responded when he went through these valleys.

David wanders

While he was in the valley David didn't run, neither did the sheep gallop frantically through these dark and dangerous regions. Because their shepherd was there, they remained quiet and followed him wherever he went.

Doesn't the same apply to Christians?! They remain very calm even when the going gets tough. They are not ac-

quainted with panic. They follow their Lord in full trust, being sure of each step as they go, whether they face good or bad days. They don't gallop and they are not petrified with fear either. Instead they wander about just as they've always done, because Jesus is with them.

David fears no evil

We shouldn't see this as meaning that David experienced no misfortune. The case is quite the opposite. When we read the Bible, we see that David even expected to encounter evil. He said, "*even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*". Mind you, he did not say: in the bright and sunny valley where I won't face danger.

We read about many other men and women of God in the Bible, who had to struggle with great problems. Job was such a man. We will hardly find an autobiography of a Christian today, in which they haven't, themselves, passed through dark valleys, who haven't had their fair share of ordeals. David was a realist, and nevertheless, he wasn't afraid, because he knew that the good Shepherd was with him. This is also the secret of a believing Christian.

People without God, who face predicaments, are likely to be ruined. They fail and despair. Many are afraid of situations that are non-existent. Their imaginations run amuck. Such people paint the gloomiest pictures of possible disasters in their imaginations. Make no mistake, the simple truth is that we die only once! However, in our imaginations and fear of death we have died a thousand times over already. Death has lost its horror for the children of God. Nevertheless, we notice that the fear that disasters might strike has become an even greater problem, than the disasters themselves.

David was set free from such a fear, and Christians have also been set free, if they have the power of the Holy Spirit living and working within them. We don't need to live in

fear of disasters constantly. Cares do not have to consume us, because only the living God knows what our future holds. Even when disaster hits us, we don't need to fall apart, because Jesus promised, "... *and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20).

David even lost the very fear of death. Take note of what he states exactly: "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.*" He did not say "... through the valley of death". Upon closer examination, we must assume that David knew something about the resurrection of Christ, by which He conquered death. Jesus declares in John 11:25, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies ...*"

The shadow of death

What we suffer, is only the shadow of death. Death itself cannot hold us any more within its dark valley, and within its morbid ravine. As children of God, we go through death – ascending to the eternal meadow of God's mountain. Where there is a shadow, there must be light. This is the light we rise to. Death stands at the wayside only, and the heavenly Light shines upon it. This is why its shadow is only cast upon our path to heaven. Nobody is afraid of a shadow! The shadow of a dog cannot bite and the shadow of a knife can't wound you. In just the same way, the shadow of death cannot kill you. So don't be afraid because "*... Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55).

Comfort In The Darkness¹⁵

“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.”
(Psalm 23:4)

We will now take a closer look at the second part of Psalm 23:4.

The rod and staff comfort us in the dark valley

The rod and the staff are two different objects. The shepherd uses the staff while he wanders around with the sheep. He also leans upon it for a rest while the sheep graze. It also seems as if it has been used to count the sheep. We read in Leviticus 27:32 that, *“The entire tithe of the herd and flock – every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd’s rod – will be holy to the Lord”*.

I’m so glad about the way the good Shepherd ensures that not a single sheep goes missing. He has counted every one of them, you and me included, who are children of God and belong to His fold. That’s why Paul, when he wrote to Timothy, had this to say, *“Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: “The Lord knows those who are His ...”* (2 Timothy 2:19). This means also, that Jesus doesn’t just count the sheep as such by asking, for instance, if they are all present. He counts each and every sheep individually, because He knows all there is to know about each individual sheep.

In talking about the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus puts it somewhat like this: *“A shepherd had a hundred sheep. One of them got lost, and now he had only ninety-nine.”* Of course, the Lord doesn’t intend to practise mental math. He wants to make it clear to us that He really knows all about

¹⁵ Sermon from Jan 21st 2001

every single sheep. He hasn't got one too many, and He hasn't got one short.

When David says: "*Your rod and your staff, they comfort me*", he means to say that Jesus has counted me with His staff too. I am included!

In connection with this, I would like to urgently appeal to all Christians who once walked with Jesus, but have back-slidden, and are now counted among the lost sheep, to take courage. Be sure of this: God won't be satisfied with the fact that one of His sheep has gotten lost because, after all, He has shed His precious blood for all of them. By doing this, He rightfully claims ownership of His sheep. As a result of this, He will make sure that not one of them is missing from His flock. "*I lay down my life for the sheep*" (*John 10:15*), is what is written in His Word.

Therefore, let's praise God that He will search for every single one of His sheep who had once been saved and loved Jesus, and have now left the path. Maybe you're one of those He's gone in search of, and is calling home by means of these words. You, too, will come to say, "Your staff, O my heavenly Father, has comforted me very much." Hallelujah!

The use of the staff for leading

The use of the rod and the staff also signifies safe leading. The shepherd uses these two objects to lead the flock. How does he do that?

Let's firstly deal with the use of the staff: With each step the shepherd places the bottom end of the staff on the path. The thud of the staff as the shepherd walks accompanies the sheep and causes them to know they are safe. They don't even have to look out for danger while they graze, instead all they need to do is to follow the sound of the staff. This is

why Jesus said, “*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me*” (John 10:27).

I believe also that this **staff** can be compared to the **Word of God**. Many people have no orientation in their lives. They search for stability and value. As they go along, they look more like a ship on the sea without a radar or even like a plane in the sky without a pilot or an air traffic controller. Have you gone lost in your life? Have you ceased to hear the gentle beat of the staff of the good Shepherd because you’re all entangled in sin? Maybe your debts have grown out of proportions, or your business endeavors are at the brink of bankruptcy. Your marriage may be in a shambles. You might be in a state of confusion and see no way out anymore.

I want to address you by telling you that there is a wonderful comfort in store for you, and that’s the staff of Jesus which is His Word. You won’t only find the beat of the staff in the Bible, you will even discover the heartbeat of God there. In Psalm 119:105, you’ll read, “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path*” (KJV). The Word of God offers us safety on the way and this translates into a Tower Of Strength to which we can flee.

I can remember numerous situations in my own life. Both my wife and I went through many illnesses while growing up. I suffered for two long years from depression. My soul was shrouded in darkness and I could find no way out. I couldn’t go to church services, let alone preach. I was so close to a nervous breakdown, that I couldn’t even drive a car anymore. If I tried, I’d have to give up after only a few meters. I was happy if I could still make it to the soft shoulder next to the lane. There I would place my tired head on the steering wheel and I would weep and weep. Here I was, a bundle of sorrows while my wife was pregnant with our third child! I wondered what would happen to us. This might be the same perplexing question you’re

having to face. I want to encourage you. The Shepherd's staff which is the Word of God, is available. Read it. It is within those pages that you'll find the will of God.

I still remember how my wife and I read the Bible in these times of walking within the shadow of death. I believe in the leading of the Holy Spirit while reading the Bible. We just opened the Bible and the first verse we beheld was Psalm 118:17, which says, "*I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done.*" This encouraged me so much. We also encountered other verses such as Isaiah 48:10, which says, "*See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction*", or "*He who believes in me will live, even though he dies*" (John 11:25). The truths found in the Bible have filled our hearts and as a result of that we have received strength and direction. The staff of the good Shepherd has become our comfort, and step-by-step, we can walk on the path. His love has indeed comforted us, and this was the way we learned to trust Him.

The comfort of the rod

It isn't only "your staff" that comforts me, but also "your rod". What do we imagine when we think of the rod? Probably we think of something looking like a club. In what way could a club comfort us? When some lazy and sluggish sheep lagged behind, such a club would be used to get them moving again so they could join the flock. Sometimes it happened that a sheep broke away from the herd, and was in danger of plunging down a precipice. It became necessary for the shepherd to use this club to discipline such a stray sheep and bring it back to the herd.

Of course, this is unpleasant. We can't think of anyone who likes being disciplined by being shoved and beaten. Nevertheless, when the good Shepherd uses the rod, it becomes profitable for your spiritual life, for your future. Af-

ter all, you must be able to make it to your heavenly destination and goal. That's why the writer says in Hebrews 12:6, "... *the Lord disciplines those he loves.*" When you have returned to the herd, you won't remember the punishment, but you'll be glad to have been able to rejoin the others, and be on the right path!

The rod can also be understood as being the Word of God. Maybe this sermon or a verse of Scripture will personally be speaking to you. In Proverbs 6:23, we read, "*For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way of life.*" Maybe the Shepherd's rod will turn out to be an accident, an illness, or any other predicament. In any case, the disciplining measures of such a rod seem not to be our friend. This is how the writer of Hebrews also felt, when he wrote, "*No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it*" (Hebrews 12:11). This passage should serve to straighten us up, and help us find the courage not to despair during such a time of discipline, but to receive it thankfully, from the hand of God. After all, what a wonderful comfort such a rod is, through which we have found the right path!

Rod and staff protect the herd

There is something else that the rod and the staff do for us. They protect the herd. We know that David fought with bears and lions as a shepherd. A shepherd watches over and defends his sheep, risking his life to ward off enemy attack by using his rod and his staff. How comforting it is for a sheep, when it realizes that the good Shepherd comes to its rescue in times of danger and powerfully resists such a threat. It will realize at such a time: The Shepherd comes to my defense.

In this way, the herd enjoys the stillness God gives and hopes in the fact that the Lord will make all things well again, because at times it will face threats by wolves and jackals. In 1 Peter 5:8, we also read, *“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”* The Lord warns us: *“For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible”* (Matthew 24:24). I’m so glad that it states here, *“if that were possible”!* This means that it is impossible to seduce the elected ones permanently, because, *“... anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him”* (1 John 5:18). The devil shatters and terrifies us, but he cannot corrupt us forever, because the almighty Lord has the rod and the staff in His hands and he has the power over all evil. What a promise!

We remember Moses and Aaron when they were about to appear before Pharaoh. God ordered them to throw the staff to the ground. The staff immediately became a serpent and devoured the snakes that the Egyptian sorcerers had brought forth (Exodus 7:8-13). In this miracle, we see that it was less about Moses’ and Aaron’s staff, but that it was more about God’s staff, which represents the power, strength and glory of the almighty God throughout all eternity.

So we repeat: *“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.”*

The Set Table¹⁶

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” (Psalm 23:5)

God prepares a table for David

David prays: *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies”* knowing that the Lord alone is the One who can prepare the table of his life. Some people assume that they are the ones who have the power to choose what goes on in their lives. They overlook the fact that all they are and have, is a gift from God.

An entrepreneur once said, “Do you think God is the one who gave me everything? I am the one who have worked hard to provide it, by my own means.” Was this man the one who gave himself life? Was he the one responsible for making sure he was born healthy, and could grow up in a secure environment? Of course not! What turn would his life have taken, had he been born disabled or if he had been born to poverty in a so-called third world country? He had proudly spoken of eating healthily and following a weekly fitness plan which are to be recommended, but that can hardly prevent sickness or a deadly accident. Our lives are dependent on God from A to Z, whether we want to believe it or not.

The Bible asks, in connection with this *“For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Corinthians 4:7)*. Of course, we are glad for sports personalities that strive and strain to become successful. That applies equally well to entrepreneurs who have been ardent workers, or students who achieve a certain goal. It isn't wrong to share their joy and to ac-

¹⁶ Sermon from Feb 18th 2001

knowledge what they have accomplished. God is detested however, when a person becomes filled with pride because of their successes. Jesus says, in John 3:27, “*A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.*” Such passages in the Bible cause us to be humble and thankful.

God deserves all thanks and praise

The protection of a copyright is regulated by law. Whoever has invented something new will want to apply for a patent. Whoever composes beautiful melodies or writes lyrics will, most certainly, apply for a copyright to protect what he or she created. If someone dares to declare God’s property as being his or her own, that person should be prepared to accept the penalty. What does the copyright look like that God has for your life? Why haven’t we granted Him all the honor as Creator of all the world, and the right to what is obviously, His? We read in the Word of God, “*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights ...*” (James 1:17). So let us join David in praise to our Creator, and thank Him for the table He has prepared before us.

When we have come to understand the true spiritual meaning of this truth, we will be humbled. The person who is proud can only be filled with pride for the things he has achieved. Such pride leads us to think too highly of ourselves and causes us to become insolent. This is when a person thinks more highly of himself than others; they put themselves above others. However, when our hearts are filled with gratitude, because we recognize that it is the Lord who blesses us with what we have – whether it be health in our families or the success of our careers – we will be different when we deal with other people. We will no longer look down degradingly at others, but we will humbly stand with each other before God, and praise Him for His mercies.

The Lord's Supper – The „Table of the Lord“

Today's sermon reminds us of, yet, another table that God has prepared for us. Paul calls it the “table of the Lord”. The forerunner of this table was the so-called table with the showbread which was to be found in the Jewish temple. A loaf was prepared and placed on this table for the twelve tribes of Israel. This was symbolical of God's promise that He would always sustain them in life. This was also symbolical in the parable of Jesus, the coming Messiah, whom God had prepared as the Bread of Life for all who believe.

When David prayed: “*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*”, he probably thought of the times he had eaten from such a table because he was so hungry, while he fled from Saul. This privilege belonged only to the priests who served in the temple, but Jesus didn't rebuke him for this behavior, later in the New Testament (Matthew 12:3-4). Probably He didn't do so because this behavior would come to be symbolical and had a prophetic meaning. This meaning took effect when Jesus died for us, making us kings and priests, and entitling us to eat of Himself who is the Bread of Life. This is what we do when we take the Lord's supper.

Let us emphasize once again that Paul speaks of the Lord's table. So the wrong table wouldn't be appropriate to celebrate the Lord's supper. When we observe this, we do not need a high altar or anything similar. This goes to show that it isn't the table itself that is meaningful but what is on it. Natural man needs natural bread, and God provides a table before him, but the man who is born of God, needs spiritual food. He recognizes his sinful state before God and he hungers for forgiveness and righteousness. And God prepares a table before him so that his spiritual longing can be satisfied.

This is what Jesus had to say about the Lord's supper: *"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world"* (John 6:35,51).

And in verses 53-55 we read, *"I tell you the truth, unless you can eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats of my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink"*.

Many religions speak about meditation. Lots of people even meditate over the crucifix, but they do not partake of Him. They don't receive Him into their lives, they don't believe and they don't trust Him to really be their Savior. However, God has prepared a body for those who believe, and that is the crucified Christ. Christians become one with their Lord by believing; they eat of His flesh and drink of His blood.

Many are disturbed by the fact that Jesus said, *"whoever eats of my flesh and drinks of my blood ..."* These however, are holy words, and I don't want these words of our Lord Jesus Christ to become a mockery to people. The secret about which Jesus spoke here, with the Lord's supper in mind, means much more of a deep spiritual joy for those who believe. Whoever comes consciously and with faith to the Lord's table that God has prepared through Jesus, experiences something that goes deep into his heart.

This is what Paul had to say when he wrote to the Corinthians concerning the Lord's supper: *"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body,*

which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

The meaning of the Lord's Supper

What does it mean for a person who, believing, partakes of the Lord’s supper? He knows that Jesus has given His blood and His life to redeem him and to forgive him of his sins. He also knows that, left to himself, he would be lost. His life would be condemned because of his sins. However, whenever he attends the Lord’s supper, he is reminded of the fact Jesus has forgiven him of his sins by shedding His own blood. In thankful memory of this deed of salvation, he eats the bread and drinks from the cup. With this he declares that Jesus is his Savior and that He will return in glory and splendor. This means that the Lord’s supper isn’t only done to remember what Jesus did, but is a reminder of the hope we have of His return. When a Christian partakes of the Lord’s supper he is deeply conscious of the relationship he has with Jesus Christ.

Having the Lord’s supper is one of the most beautiful and gratifying experiences a Christian can have; being one with Jesus, partaking of His blood, shed for us and His body, broken for us. My wish for us all, when we participate in the next supper is to be able to say like David, “O God, you prepare before me a wonderful table; a table of the Lord. And you do this even in the presence of my enemies.” There are many who have celebrated the Lord’s supper even while they were pursued and became martyrs for their faith, and while they were in jail cells and labor camps. God prepared the table for them and they experienced the communion and love of their Savior Jesus Christ.

And so, as a believer, it is a great blessing to participate in the Lord's supper, having a heart filled with sincere and earnest worship.

The Feast Of Joy¹⁷

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” (Psalm 23:5)

It is a practised custom in the Middle East, that an honored guest is first anointed with precious, fragrant oils, and then given a glass of specially selected wine that is intentionally filled to overflowing. These are the gestures that David speaks of here. He draws a parallel here of his Lord and God, the good Shepherd, and a good host. That’s why I think you could present this sermon under another heading: “As God’s guest” or “Welcome to the Father’s house”.

As God's guest

What is this like? The section of this verse we want to closely look at first, is the one that says, “*You anoint my head with oil.*” If we look in Luke 7, we’ll see that this custom was practised. There you’ll find the story of the anointing of the feet of Jesus by a woman who was a sinner. She had poured ointment over His feet, from an alabaster box while He was a guest at the house of a Pharisee. Simon, the Pharisee, was outraged by this deed, but Jesus rebuked him when He said, “*You did not put oil on my head; but she has poured perfume on my feet*” (Luke 7:46). So we note that Simon had not behaved as a good host would.

When we come to God to receive His grace, He welcomes us. He purifies and anoints our heads with oil. True Christians can really be seen as anointed ones. What does this picture mean in reality? When someone comes to Christ, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon him. The Bible has a few terms for this act of acceptance by God. These terms underscore the different state of those who turn to Him. The Bible speaks, for example, of “*conversion*” (Acts

¹⁷ Sermon from Feb 18th 2001

15:3), of a “*new creation*” (2 Corinthians 5:17: Galatians 6:15), and also of a “*rebirth*” (Titus 3:5). It speaks, however, of the transformation from being unsaved to being saved as “*anointing*” and being “*sealed*”.

Here are a few Bible verses: “*Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come*” (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). To be anointed and to be sealed means that we who are born-again Christians belong to our Lord and have been secured in Him. What consolation! What a hope this is!

Another beautiful verse can be found in Isaiah 61:1,3: “*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach ..., and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.*” The people whom God has chosen and has invited to come to Him, have been planted by Him. He takes away the sorrow that has come upon them as a result of their sins, when they lived in disobedience. He has given them, instead, the oil of gladness.

Joy because of the Father's acceptance

In these words written in Isaiah 61, we come face-to-face with what it means to be glad for salvation, because our heavenly Father forgave our sins and has accepted us. This is what the prodigal son also experienced. He had of his own free will gone his own way and finally landed in the pig-sty. He was also forgiven for the sins he had committed when he chose to return to his father. He was also washed and anointed. His father cried out, “*Bring the best robe and put it on him,. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his*

feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate" (Luke 15:22-23). The fact that the father puts a ring on his son's finger, by-the-way, signifies his acceptance, and is symbolical of being sealed. We will take a closer look at these expressions in a while.

Psalm 30:11 also speaks of great joy: *"You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy..."* A songwriter puts it this way: "THE LORD ANOINTED MY HEAD WITH THE OIL OF JOY! WHERE DID THIS BLESSING COME FROM? I BELIEVED HIS WORD!" In the chorus, we can find something like this: "HOLY ANOINTMENT, REMAIN ON ME; DIVINE COMFORTER, LEAD ME IN ALL MY WAYS."¹⁸

Anointed with the Holy Spirit

What does the Bible mean when it speaks of being anointed, and about the fact that God anoints our head? It means that believers receive the Holy Spirit, and that God Himself imparts unto them divine life and divine strength, so that they will be able to live a life of faith.

Addressing the Christians, the Apostle says in 1 John 2:20, *"But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth"*. This means, in other words, that because of the anointing they have received the knowledge. In verse 27, we read, *"... his anointing teaches you about all things..."*. This means the Holy Spirit in us confirms that we are the children of God and that we can be certain of our salvation. This transforms the faith in us to a state of being certain. It is quite the opposite of what we see in people who claim to be Christians but have no personal relationship with Christ. Such people say, "Believing isn't about being certain". They will feel this way because, for them, believing has to do with the emphasized sense of what they

¹⁸ To be found in the German songbook called „Pfingstjubiläum“ No. 129

feel. This sense is without any foundation at all. This kind of belief is just a mere human belief. It has nothing in common with the belief spoken of in the Bible.

The Bible declares, in contrast, that the Holy Spirit is our teacher. He imparts knowledge to our hearts and teaches us divine lessons. So we see that faith is by the grace of God in connection with the Holy Spirit. He's the one who performs within us, so that in turn our faith becomes one of being sure, instead of some sort of a vague presumption or fuzzy idea. He enables us to shout a resounding "yes" to the Word of God and the promises found there. This certainty can, already, be seen in the Old Testament. In Job we read the following. "*I know that my redeemer lives...*" (Job 19:25).

Scripture also speaks of something called "sealing". A painter once asked me what this expression could mean. He had heard the term in one of my sermons and couldn't fathom what I meant when I used it. In his trade, he pointed out, he uses this word also. He often worked on the facade of houses and sealed them so that they were protected from the influence of wind and weather.

I explained to him that his usage of this expression wasn't far-fetched at all but could indeed serve to clarify the Biblical term. This is how I put it: God seals the believers with the protection of the Holy Spirit, so that the evil enemy and sin, cannot ruin them. Instead, He keeps them until the end. Let me now address you, dear reader: Are you among the anointed of God? Have you been sealed by the Holy Spirit? If not, ask Jesus to do so; to impart that faith to you that will give you certainty.

„My cup overflows“

David speaks of yet a second kind of divine hospitality when he writes, "*my cup overflows*". Even more precisely put, one could also translate this passage this way, "*my cup*

is filled to overflowing". After the act of anointing one's head, the next step was a sort of "champaign reception" or better yet, "goblet greeting". When we entertain guests we often, elegantly, only fill their glasses half-way. In those days that would have been a great offence, an insult even, in the Middle East. The host poured the drink so the glass could overflow. This overflowing goblet was signaling to the guest: "Be at home and feel free to eat, drink and bask in my hospitality. All that is in my house is at your disposal. You are as one of my own."

This is what we also experience, spiritually, as children of God. Jesus fills our cups to overflowing. We haven't received a half glass of forgiveness of sins or a third of a glass of eternal life, but our Lord invites us to draw from His fullness of life. He has given us in abundance what we need for our spiritual lives. So I'm calling you, dear friend, to accept His invitation. Take a seat at the table that God has provided for you. Drink from the overflowing cup that Christ offers you. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Only God Is Good¹⁹

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

(Psalm 23:6; KJV)

David assumes that goodness and mercy will follow him for a life time. Why does he make such a claim? How does he know that this will be the case with him? Does King David mean to say that he will perform well, and continue in this light in the sight of God so that he'll receive a good reward for his deeds?

I rather believe, that David had the right view of God in his heart. Why so? The Bible speaks, in various passages, that God is a good God. Mankind is evil and there is not a single one that does good (Psalm 14:3). God, however, is good. Have a look at how Jesus responded, for instance, when the rich young ruler wanted to address Him as “*good Master*”: “*No-one is good – except God alone*” (Mark 10:18). In the same way, the Apostle Paul says, “*Let God be true, and every man a liar*” (Romans 3:4). This is the great contrast: God alone is good, and no-one else.

This Biblical principle could be understood in this way: All humans are sinful and need redemption. Only God is without sin and that's why, apart from Him, nobody is good. So David's portrayal was right. God is good! That's why King David could say, “Because God is good, nothing else than His mercy and goodness can happen to me”. **In what light can we see the „goodness“ of God?**

In His judgement

Many people hold the view that God won't condemn anyone, and send them to hell, simply because He is good. Is this opinion right? Absolutely not! The simple fact that

¹⁹ Sermon from Feb 25th 2001

God is good demands that He exercises judgement in condemning evil. A person who is a judge isn't seen as unjust because he lawfully passes a judgement! Instead it is a blessing when justice is upheld in any country. How good to know we have independent judges! If criminals weren't convicted, no civilization would exist, and there would be no peace. God isn't evil when He restores justice, because justice is something that is good. It is comforting to know that no evil-doer – whether liar, thief, child abuser, murderer, the person who commits perjury or any other obscene person – will have the last say, but God Himself will. He pronounces judgement, righteously, on everyone who deserves to be judged. So God is good, because He administers justice.

In His patience and long-suffering

God is also good because He is patient. In actuality, we would have deserved to be judged a long time ago, looking at the description we just dealt with. We would have deserved to be condemned to eternal darkness long ago, for our sins, because according to God's justice and law, we have committed wrong. The fact that we haven't been destroyed is due to His patience and long-suffering only. Paul poses the question in Romans 2:4, "*Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness leads you towards repentance?*"

In Exodus 34:6 we read, "... *The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness...*" He is patient with you also. Think of the multitudes of people who have already had to appear before him, while He gives you still time to turn around. Some people misunderstand what God's patience is all about. They believe that He would never judge them, simply because He has never before done so. Make no

mistake about this truth, however: It is only due to God's grace that He has been so good and patient with us! So don't show contempt for His "*kindness, tolerance, patience and long-suffering*" by continuing to sin as you have always done. Instead, thank Him that you have been allowed to live. You don't have a right to live, but He wants to give you the time to repent.

God is good to His children

He is good to the world in that He judges justly. He is good to mankind in that He is long-suffering and patient. But, He has got a very special relationship to His chosen ones, the believers. The fact is that they won't appear before Him in judgement, because Christ has suffered judgement for them on the cross already. The Father has laid His wrath and punishment that we deserved for our sins on His Son. So when a person believes that Christ has died in his stead, he won't enter into judgement and condemnation anymore, because Almighty God doesn't judge a person twice. Do you grasp the full impact of this? It means that the person for whom Jesus has been crucified, is free! That's why David, who was a child of God could say, "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life!*" He knew he would be free from the judgement of God, and therefore, only goodness would follow.

Life becoming a bed of roses?

Do believing Christians really have only good in their lives? Do they not also experience pain, sickness, disappointments, loss and suffering? The Apostle Paul gives us the following answer in his letter to the Romans: "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*" (Romans 8:28). So Paul also speaks of the goodness that believers will have in their lives. However, we should not

overlook the fact that those who will enjoy this privilege, whom God loves, are those who are His children.

It would be erroneous to equate “good” here with a life without problems. Without a doubt, a Christian often has to struggle with difficulties and plight. However, he rests assured that all these things serve the purpose of preparing him for an eternal life together with God. I’ve had my share of hardship as well. Such trying times will occur in the future also, and that includes the experience of death. Nevertheless, I wouldn’t want to miss out on any of these times, but thank God for them, because I am made to recognize what the important things in life are. Pain and heartaches served to shape my character.

If we only experience success, we will become proud, haughty, and presumptuous. However, when we also suffer failure and meet the downside of life, we are able to return to basics, because we recognize our limits and are, therefore, humbled. In connection with this, I heard there is an American saying. I like it very much. It says something like this, “Whosoever the gods want to destroy, they grant him thirty long years of on-going success.” Because the true God does not want to destroy His children, He will, by all means, allow failure in their lives. When He allows difficulties in the lives of His children, He does this out of sheer love for us. He wants us to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus as the Bible puts it. Therefore, it is exactly the challenging times that bring about good, because we are being molded into the likeness of God continuously.

David probably wrote the 23rd Psalm while he was yet a shepherd boy. The Bible tells us that he had to suffer a lot in his life later. We can recall the time Saul was in pursuit of his life, the betrayal of his son Absalom, and not least of all, his own sins. And yet, all this served to shape his character. After all these experiences, both his pride and his self-reliance were broken. It was then that he sought God,

for he recognized that he could depend on Him. His self-reliance was destroyed and he learned instead to trust the Lord whole-heartedly.

So we see that, just as in David's example, God allows His children to fail now and again, because it's for our good. Evidently, in their own individual sense, not everything is good. Cancer isn't good. That's why Paul didn't write that all things are good. Instead, he tells us that, "*In all things God works for the good...*" Whatever comes our way, God has good intentions for those who believe.

He promises in Jeremiah 29:11, "*For I know the plans I have for you,*" declares the Lord, "*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*" David knew his Shepherd. That's why he also knew that in times of darkness and plight in his life, God already knew the good that would occur. Whatever happens in your life, is also meant for good, as long as God is your Shepherd. Doesn't this piece of knowledge give you great peace and certainty? Therefore, as His child, take all things from the loving hand of God in full trust.

An actor and a pastor were once invited to attend a family festivity. The actor was then asked to read the 23rd Psalm. He proceeded to do so with great artistic expression, and as he reached the last verse that says, "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life ...*", there was a big round of applause. Someone then asked the pastor if he wouldn't want to read the Psalm once more. He was a bit confused, and became uncertain because of the brilliant way the actor had read it, but he proceeded anyway. No one clapped, because while he read, an atmosphere of reverend stillness had spread across the whole gathering. The pastor had been so engrossed in the Word, that his reading came across as coming from his very heart. Everyone could sense how much he could identify with the 23rd Psalm. The actor

then turned to the gathering and said, “I know the Psalm, but the pastor knows the Shepherd!”

My wish is that you won't only know the Psalm, but above all, the Shepherd because you will come to know that there are only good intentions in His heart for you.

Eternal Certainty²⁰

*“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the day”
(Psalm 23:6; KJV)*

David claimed he would dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Was that declaration an expression of self-reliance? Was David sure that he would somehow manage to remain faithful to his God? If this was the case, we would misunderstand Psalm 23. If it was that he could depend on himself, he wouldn't have needed his good Shepherd. We know however, that David did not depend on himself and his abilities to be able to remain faithful to God. Instead, he had placed his whole trust in the good Shepherd.

David relies on the promises of God

Where did David get the reassurance he had that he would dwell in the house of the Lord forever? In my opinion, he got it from the covenant that God had once made with him. This covenant didn't rest on mutual dependence. God had made these pledges and oaths, and promised to fulfill them irrevocably. All this was not dependent on how David would behave. God told him, as we can also read in the New Testament, “I will remain faithful whether or not you remain faithful” (cf. 2 Timothy 2:13). It was the pledge of eternal grace for David himself and for his children who believed, who were yet to come. We read in Isaiah 55:3 about this covenant: *“I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.”*

Other translations like the KJV for instance, speak of the *“sure mercies”* that God had promised David and his spiritual descendants. Paul was also one who preached about this irrevocable grace of God toward David, on his first missionary trip to Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:34). This

²⁰ Sermon from Feb 25th 2001

promise of eternal grace gave David such a reassurance and certainty, that he joyfully proclaimed: *“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Psalm 23:6, KJV).*

This eternal covenant of grace was not only valid for David, but still is for all believers. The Bible proclaims in almost all its pages that God’s grace is an eternal grace. In Psalm 136, KJV, for example, we read: *“O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good; for his mercy endureth forever”*, and we don’t read this only once or twice, but 26 times! What does God want to say to us here? He wants to tell us that there is absolute security for His children! He pledges, *“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed...” (Isaiah 54:10).* As the good Shepherd, Jesus promises His sheep, *“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29).*

In other words, Jesus will never lose one of His sheep. One could take this Biblical truth, and illustrate it with another image: The Bible says that the children of God are members of His body. Can one imagine that Christ would be and remain amputated for all eternity; a Christ who has lost some of his limbs? Will Jesus not be a complete person in heaven? Will He be a cripple? No! Never!

David believed in the reign of grace

David was certain of his eternal salvation, because he was absolutely certain about the promises of his Lord and Shepherd. That is why he also believed that grace would reign. He knew that those who had been saved by the grace of God, would abide under this grace for eternity. For from the very moment one is saved, grace reigns in the life of

every believer. Paul puts it this way: “*So that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*” (Romans 5:21).

So we see that grace doesn't function like an intimidated subordinate, that one could capriciously use or even discard. Grace does not depend on our moods, instead it reigns. One cannot just shake it off. Once a person is saved by grace, that person comes under its ownership.

That's why God also says, “I will be merciful no matter what happens, and no matter how the child of grace behaves.” It is clearly spelled out in Psalm 89, which also deals with the covenant with David: “*I will establish his line for ever, his throne as long as the heavens endure. ... If they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered*” (Psalm 89:29, 28-29).

The grace of God brings us up and makes us holy

This text knocks the wind out of the sail of everyone who implies that one can live as one wants because grace is irrevocably guaranteed. It is written, “*I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging.*” So we know now that in essence, grace guarantees a good upbringing and serves as a corrective measure. It does not imply that, “You can do as you please”. The view of God that those who preach liberal theology present, says, “Live as you please and go ahead and sin, because you will get to heaven anyway since God is love.” This isn't what we find in the Bible. Instead, we read: “... *You (God) hate all who do wrong*” (Psalm 5:5).

God also says that, “*I will have mercy on whom I want to have mercy*” This means that those who have become one

with God through faith, now dwell under the reign of mercy. The essence of this grace is seen in its divine ability to sanctify believers. The children of God are changed. One can also say that they are: led into a practical state of justification and are changed, becoming more and more like Christ. Pertaining to the same aspect, we read in Titus 2:12, *“It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age”*.

So being justified doesn't mean you remain the same; quite the opposite, you will say no to an ungodly nature, and you are changed while being under the disciplinary rod of God. Anyone who loves his child will discipline that child. This is just the way grace works in the lives of the children of God. Hebrews 12:6 says, *“... because the Lord disciplines those he loves”*. In verse 8 we read, *“If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons”*.

As a child, I often experienced this kind of practical love from my mother. Back then we had little money, so one day I decided to join a few friends in stealing some apples. Our pockets were already full when we suddenly discovered a policeman standing right in front of us. My friends and I had to hand over the apples, and I was asked where I lived. The policeman walked us all the way home. My mother opened the door, took one look at me and then at the police, and finally the lads behind me. She asked only me, “What did you do?” I stuttered, “I, I, I, was the one but I wasn't the only one.” She then gave me a good slap on both sides of the head. After this measure of punishment, I said to her, “It wasn't fair that I was the only one to get punished. The others did the same as I did.” She said to me, “What concern of mine are the others? You are my son and I have the responsibility of bringing you up in the right way.” She didn't threaten me with death, because I had stolen an ap-

ple. No! Her love and mercy caused her to discipline me instead of killing me. This is what is expressed in Psalm 89:33-34. God promised, *“I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; but I will not take my love from him...”*.

David knew this, and that’s why he could say: *“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”* (Psalm 23:6 KJV). This is also the stance we take. God’s children can depend on their Lord just like David did. However, if you aren’t one of those who belong to the Lord, dear friend, I plead from my heart with you: Turn from your sin and to the Lord today. You too will say as David did, “Whatever comes my way, I’ll take it all from the hands of God, because His intentions towards me are good.”

Book References

Wolfgang Wegert. Foundations Of Faith.
arche-medien: Hamburg, 2003. pb., 96 p. € 4,90

This book deals with the foundational questions of Faith such as: Why is mankind lost? What does it mean to be “born again”; what is meant when someone says he “got saved”? Apart from that we deal with issues pertaining to the working of the Holy Spirit, the believer’s sustenance, up to those dealing with the topic of death. The foreword of this book gives us the following glimpse, amongst others:

“This booklet is a collection of sermon extracts and articles. Its purpose is to help us reflect on the very foundation of our Christian faith. In short, it takes us all the way ‘back to the roots’.

We will be looking at such crucial questions, as: What really is faith and conversion? What is the significance of getting baptized? What is characteristic of a Christian congregation? What does the Bible say about prayer and the Lord’s Supper? I’m afraid we cannot deal with all the questions of faith in this booklet; but then, this is not so much a piece of theological literature for scholars. It is rather a brief compilation of the most important nuggets of information and a hands-on guide on issues like how to get your faith started, developed and fed by the Spirit for a lifetime.”

»Foundations Of Faith« is a very refreshing read for everyone who is soundly seeking to be informed about the most important topics of the Christian faith. As they go through, each reader will be challenged to answer questions pertaining to his/her personal relationship with God and to seek a change if one is needed.

This booklet can be procured directly from us (address on page 2).