

**"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."**

"My sheep listen to my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never die. No one can snatch them away from me."

"I am your shepherd, your provider and guide through the maze of life with all its demands and challenges. I give you everything you need to live. Trust me with your life, and you will lack nothing. I know you are always wanting something, often wanting what you don't really need, wanting what's not good for you, and what isn't yours to have. I don't promise everything you might want but I promise what you need to live. Remember I am the one who created you and died and rose for you and I won't let you down. I am your Good Shepherd, I won't take advantage of you. Trust me and want for nothing. Ask me today while you are here for whatever you need. You won't get everything you want from me, but if you trust me you won't want for anything.

My sheep, some of you look a little ragged around the edges this morning and some of you look so tired from all that rushing around, all that worry and stress about so many things beyond your control. I notice some of you are nodding off already. Perhaps that's what some of you need right now, some rest. Let me lead you to quiet pools and green pastures where you can rest a while and where I can restore your souls, feeding you with the best food - my word, and reminding you of that quiet pool of life-giving water that is your baptism and the Holy Spirit at work in you. I know you just can't sit still, and sometimes I have to let you exhaust yourself before you are ready to rest with me, but it doesn't have to be that way. Every day and each week we can have some rest time together and I can restore your soul, your soul which you so often neglect. You seem so preoccupied with your bodies yet you neglect your souls. Let me give you new strength as you pour out your troubles to me and as I speak my word into your heart and as I give you my body and soul sustaining food and drink today.

My sheep, I have plans for you, plans for good not evil. I have paths I want you to walk in - my ways and my will, not the world's, not even your own, but my paths of righteousness. I have set you on that path when I baptised you - I dipped you in that water made holy by my word and put my spirit in you, you joined my flock and I became your shepherd. I have set before you a life of love and good things to do for me each day. Walk in my paths, don't stray. But if you do, remember I will come looking for you. I will never give up on you even if you give up on me. Remember I will put you on my shoulder and carry you home and together we'll celebrate when you are found again. Don't ignore my voice when it comes to you, whether that's through my word or the voice of another Christian.

My sheep there will be times when you will go through deep darkness, valleys and shadows. Sometimes that will be because of your own doing and going your own ways. Other times you will blame me for that darkness and you will wonder where I am. My sheep, believe that I am with you in that darkness, and don't stop believing that. Remember I am the good shepherd who laid down his life for you. Believe me I know what darkness and loneliness is. I was the one on the cross, remember, it was only a few weeks ago, Good Friday. Have you forgotten already? But now I am alive and I am alive to be with you in your dark valleys too. And I will be there to protect you. There is no need to fear. I don't promise things will all go your way in life - you know that already from life's experiences. You will still have accidents, get sick and lose loved ones, and one day you too

will die, but I promise to be with you in it all and to save and protect you for all eternity. You are mine. You always will be. Don't be afraid of any evil for I will be with you. That is my promise. Hear my words and believe them.

My sheep, I know some of you are facing difficulties with other people, and sometimes that will happen just because you follow me. But even though people may make life difficult for you because you listen to my voice and follow me, you can still celebrate and enjoy life in the midst of those who have become your enemies. They won't have the last laugh over your life, I have the last word, and I say that I am preparing a home and a banquet where you can be with me forever. You get a taste of it today when you come to my table even now, whenever you accept my invitation to commune with me— you are in a sense already in my house, with me, eating my food, my drink, protected from the evil one and from people who oppress you.

My sheep, I want you to know I am here to anoint your wounds with my healing oil and with the joy of my Holy Spirit, and I want to fill your cup of life to overflowing. In fact have set my sheepdogs onto you - they are called "goodness and mercy", and I have commanded them to pursue you like sheepdogs, to follow you all the days of your life. You may not always see goodness in everything and I agree with you that not everything that happens is good, but I promise to be there in the middle of everything working for good and I promise to always show mercy to you when you fail me. If you ever doubt that just remember what I went through for you on the cross. As long as you look to the cross, mercy follows you and won't let you go until you enter the joy of my home in heaven.

These things are my promise to you as the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for my sheep, and you are one of them, precious, loved, died for on the cross. Don't wait for these words to be said at your funeral. Live in the comfort they offer you now, and leave here aware that I am with you, ahead of you and behind you, and yes even within you."

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