

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

All right, this being Good Shepherd Sunday, we're obviously going to talk about God and what it means to be a good shepherd. But before we get there, I'd like to focus on this Acts passage a little bit. This is of course after Pentecost. This is when Peter and John heal the crippled man, and he begins to walk and people are going around and saying, "What is going on? This man was crippled his entire life, and now he's walking." And Peter and John are going, "I don't know why you're surprised. Jesus healed him and he rose up and walked. What's the big deal?" Well, this gets the attention of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the scribes and all these others, and they're upset. Now, interestingly enough, the Sadducees have quite a good reason, at least in their own mind, of being upset.

The Sadducees were the leaders in Israel at the time. They were the local authorities under the Roman government. And they had special privileges and special powers and authorities. They were well respected. They basically held the peace with the Romans. But one of the interesting thing is, even though they were Jewish, even though they read the Old Testament, even though they in theory believed in God, they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They were convinced that once you died, that was it. There was no afterlife. There was no soul that went on for all eternity. There was no resurrection of the body. There was just death and you were done. And now Peter and John are preaching that Jesus Christ, whom they know was dead, is now alive, and people who are preaching in his name are bringing people from sickness into health, crippled into fully functioning.

And so yeah, they're upset. This is upsetting. Everything that's going on, the whole power structure, is getting off. And so they get sent before the high priest. And you can see the Roman influence throughout this even as the names. You've got Annas and then Caiaphas, which is one generation, and then the next generation is John and Alexander. You can feel the Greek influence and the Roman influence all the way down, even in the names. And so they are trying to keep Peter and John quiet. Just don't upset anything, just stop preaching about Jesus. But we know that it is the word of God and the proclamation of the Gospel that does give us hope. This is the good shepherd who takes care of us, who mends our wounds and who heals us.

And so we have this image of the good shepherd coming to care for his sheep. And a good shepherd knows his flock, knows what they're capable of and what they are not capable of. Of course, it's not very difficult because sheep aren't really capable of much of anything. So the shepherd knows that if they're going to be kept safe, if anything good is going to happen, he is going to need to guard them and protect

them and keep them in his loving care. And so that's what he does. And how do we know that we are his sheep and he is our shepherd? In our baptisms, he claims us. He adopts us as his children, and he makes us his own. He calls us by name, so much so that he knows when one of us goes astray, he goes after us. And he rejoices in the opportunity to pick us up and to bring us back to the fold. Which is a great comfort because we have this wonderful ability to get into trouble.

Now, Paul says it best, "The good that I ought to do, I don't do, and the evil that I ought not to do, that I do." Yeah, there we go. We get it wrong. We get it messed up. And I don't know about you, but for me, I know that I get myself into trouble by what I say and oftentimes by what I don't say. How many times have we been in a situation where we know we shouldn't have said something and yet we open by our mouths and we say it anyway? And how many times do we know we ought to have said something, but we keep silent for fear of the judgment of the crowd or ridicule or something else? How often do we do something we know is wrong, but we just want to do it that time? It's only one time. So we get ourselves into trouble quite often. And it is only the hope that the good shepherd is there to protect us that gives us the promise of everlasting life.

Now, when we were reciting the [inaudible 00:05:05], Psalm 23, I'm sure that was very familiar to most of you. And I really want to focus on this central section. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

Have you been feeling like you've been walking through the valley of the shadow of death? Have you had a little bit of evil rise up in your life recently? Have you looked around the world and maybe seen evil around you? It seems like it's all over the place. And yet our good shepherd protects us. He guards us and watches over us so that we do not need to be afraid. His rod and his staff, they comfort us. Because he knows that we need to be taken care of, and he does care for us willingly of his own accord.

Now, we've been, a lot of us in our society have been kind of far removed from farming life, but maybe some of us grew up on a farm. And one thing, if you remember on a farm, you always take care of the animals first before you take care of yourself. I remember getting up at o-dark-thirty to take care of the cows and the horses and the chickens and the geese and whatever else we had on the farm at any given time. I had to take care of them, feed them. And then once I got my chores done, then I could have breakfast.

But I had to take care of my flock, my animals, first before I took care of myself. And it's the same thing today. It's what I tell my daughter and taking care of the goats. You take care of your animals first and then you take care of yourself. And fortunately, we have a good shepherd who does that every single time, in every

way, shape and form. He takes care of us. He guards us, and he protects us. And he does this in a very unique way. He lays down his life. Now, we all know when we think of the crucifixion, we think of the guards, the Roman guards taking him and binding him, shoving a crown of thorns on his head, whipping him and beating him, and then eventually nailing him to that cross and putting him up there on the cross to suffer. And that is awful. It's horrible. The graphic imagery is frightening. And yet it wasn't the Romans who put him on the cross. It wasn't the Romans who forced him to die. It's not like Jesus woke up one day and said, "Well, I wonder how I'm going to get out of this." He knew exactly what was going to happen. He told his disciples exactly what was going to happen, and then it happened exactly as he said it would. He willingly went to the cross.

If he had not wanted to go to the cross, there's nothing that Romans would've been able to do to make him. I mean, he told Peter, when Peter cut off the ear of the one guy, he said, "Don't you think I could call down a legion of angels to protect me and to guard me?" No, he willingly, willingly went to the cross. Why? Because he loves us, because he wants us to know the assurance of the Heavenly Father who knows us as his dear children. He wants us to be confident that no matter what trouble we get into, whether it be of our own doing or the world around us, whatever we face in this world, whatever trials and tribulations we have, we can turn to him and we can know that we are protected. We can know that we are safe. So we hold fast to this promise. He is our good shepherd, and therefore, we do not want for anything. Think about that. This is what we say: "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, and he leads me beside still waters, and he restores my soul." Doesn't that sound wonderful? Peaceful? I mean, this is what God promises not for our future when we eventually get to paradise. This is what he promises us today. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. It doesn't say He will make me lie down in green pastures eventually. He says, he makes me lie down in green pastures. He restores my soul today. So whatever evil is coming your way. Whatever valley and shadow you are facing today, know this. Your shepherd is watching over you. And he will not let you go astray. And even if you fight hard enough to get away from him, he's going to come chasing after you and bring you back.

Because He willingly died for you, and He willingly came back to life so that He could offer that comfort and that peace to you and to me. What a glorious thing it is to know that our Father knows us by name and calls us. Or as the case may be, our good shepherd knows his sheep and protects his flock. May his grace and his mercy and his peace be and abide with you always now and forevermore unto life everlasting. Amen.