

The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want



We all know the words. Whether we've heard them offered as comfort to mourners at funeral services or read in times of personal crisis, the 23rd psalm resonates for us with the familiar Christian message that God will always provide for us. No matter how many times these words have been spoken to us, they ring out their truth in a deeper, more basic way when set to music. This setting makes that especially true, as its gentle melody carries the abiding peace of the psalm into our hearts and encourages us to hold on to it. Even without the words, the tune breathes "comfort" into our weary souls, a reminder of God's presence. The hymn participates in the very work the psalm ascribes to God: sustaining us.

When I sing this hymn, I am transported to "pastures green" and "quiet waters." I feel "restore[d]," renewed such that walking "within the paths of righteousness" seems like a manageable task. The familiar pastoral images take a new hold in my imagination and my spirit, enveloping me in the warm security of being completely cared for.

Even when the psalm mentions circumstances that seem completely daunting, such as passing through "death's dark vale" and being seated at a "table" full "of my foes," "I fear no ill." When merely spoken, these words seem nice but unrealistic, giving rise to uncomfortable questions. Is it possible to fear nothing in the midst of great trials, even in the face of death? Why would a protective God surround us with our enemies? However, when sung, the entire psalm, uncomfortable parts and all, instills a quiet confidence in God's constant care. The promise that "Thou art with me" is enough somehow to leave me believing fully that "goodness and mercy [. . .] shall surely follow me."

Already we carry these words with us; let's add the tune. When we meet people in need of the peace of vast fields and still waters, let us sing. Let us sing so that all around us might feel the same deep calm that we find knowing that "in God's house forevermore my dwelling place shall be."

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