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A Prayer to the Good Shepherd

Saint Gregory of Nyssa

Early Church Father and Doctor of the Church



This excerpt from St. Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on the Song of Songs (Cap. 2: PG 44, 802), using the imagery of Psalm 23, appeals to the Lord Jesus Christ for the promised green pastures, restful waters and noonday rest that is the final, eternal destination of those who love God and walk in his ways. It is used in the Roman Catholic Office of readings for Thursday in the 33rd week in ordinary time with the corresponding biblical reading taken from Zechariah 11:4-12:8.

Where are you pasturing your flock, O good Shepherd, who carry the whole flock on your shoulders? (for the whole of human nature is one sheep and you have lifted it onto your shoulders). Show me the place of peace, lead me to the good grass that will nourish me, call me by name so that I, your sheep, hear your voice, and by your speech give me eternal life. Answer me, you whom my soul loves.

I give you the name 'you whom my soul loves' because your name is above every name and above all understanding and there is no rational nature that can utter it or comprehend it. Therefore your name, by which your goodness is known, is simply the love my soul has for you. How could I not love you, when you loved me so much, even though I was black, that you laid down your life for the sheep of your flock? A greater love cannot be imagined, than exchanging your life for my salvation.

Show me then (my soul says) where you pasture your flock, so that I can find that saving pasture too, and fill myself with the food of heaven without which no-one can come to eternal life, and run to the spring and fill myself with the drink of God. You give it, as from a spring, to those who thirst – water pouring from your side cut open by the lance, water that, to whoever drinks it, is a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

If you lead me to pasture here, you will make me lie down at noon, sleeping at peace and taking my rest in light unstained by any shade. For the noon has no

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shade and the sun stands far above the mountain peaks. You bring your flock to lie in this light when you bring your children to rest with you in your bed. But no-one can be judged worthy of this noonday rest who is not a child of light and a child of the day. Whoever has separated himself equally from the shadows of evening and morning, from where evil begins and evil ends, at noon he will lie down and the sun of righteousness will shine on him.

Show me, then (my soul says), how I should sleep and how I should graze, and where the path is to my noonday rest. Do not let me fall away from your flock because of ignorance, and find myself one of a flock of sheep that are not yours.

Thus my soul spoke, when she was anxious about the beauty that God's care had given her and wanted to know how she could keep this good fortune for ever.



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