

## God, Our Shepherd Psalm 23

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As we come to God's Word again this Sunday, we are well aware of the trying days God has us in. We believe that God is in control, and we believe that God is good. And because of that, we can come to his Word and we can rest in the promises that God gives to find comfort in his Word.

Today we're going to come to what is arguably the most comforting language in the Bible. This is simultaneously the most famous—other than perhaps John 3:16—the most famous portion of the Bible. It is one of the most beloved. Many of you probably have this section of Scripture memorized and many of you probably have it on some kind of a plaque in your home. What am I talking about? I'm talking about the famous Psalm 23.

Part of the popularity of Psalm 23 is that it is so easily applied to the challenges of life like the ones we are presently experiencing in our society with the coronavirus. How many people on their death bed uttered, "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*" (Psalm 23:4 NKJV) before stepping into eternity? This psalm is a masterpiece. It is beautiful. It is theological. It's the Lord's prayer of the Old Testament. It is powerful. It is simple. It is popular for very good reasons.

And it is very familiar and as we come to it this morning, that's one of the challenges we have with it. It is so familiar you might already think to yourself, *Oh I know what Psalm 23 says*. Why don't we fight against that and believe that God can give us a special and fresh word today, particularly in this crisis that we are in.

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.  
He restores my soul.  
He leads 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 mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
forever."* (Psalm 23 ESV)

The heading identifies it as a psalm of David—likely after he became a king. Some think he wrote it in his wilderness time during the betrayal and rebellion led by his own son Absalom. That would be a unique hurt, don't you think? For your own son to lead an army against

you? In two different episodes, both David's father-in-law and his son tried to kill him. David knew personally the dark night of the soul. Yet he writes this psalm filled with confidence and tranquility in God.

To understand Psalm 23, we have to see three different images found here: *God is my Shepherd. God is my Host. God is my eternal companion.* The psalm transitions between these quickly without apology or explanation.

### **God is My Shepherd** (verses 1-4)

The psalm begins with this powerful statement, "*The Lord is my Shepherd.*" (Psalm 23:1) Let's remember who describes God as a shepherd—David, the most famous shepherd in history. Remember he was tending to the sheep when God led Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint the next king. No one suspected the shepherd boy to be God's chosen one, not even his own family.

But the life lessons David learned on those hills of Bethlehem were to guide him the rest of his life. Some night under the stars perhaps he began to consider how God cares for him like he, the shepherd, cared for his own sheep.

David says, "*The Lord is MY shepherd.*" That is a statement of relationship and identity. It's highly personal. How is God a shepherd to us? The language here is poetic and pastoral describing what all good shepherds do for their sheep. They provide, restore, lead, and sustain their sheep.

### **God provides for us**

"*I shall not want.*" (v. 1) Anyone interested in how God provides for us in these difficult days? What a wonderful thought this is today. Shepherds have to constantly be thinking about the needs of their sheep. Sheep have needs. They need food. Water. Shelter. Protection. A good shepherd constantly meets those basic needs and constantly is thinking about them. If you are a sheep with a good shepherd, you don't have to stress out about needs. Why? *We have an awesome shepherd; he's got it covered.*

This is the language of dependency and trust in God's ability to meet our needs. "*I shall not want.*" Say it to yourself, *if God is my shepherd, I will never have a need that ultimately God will fail to meet.* God is an awesome shepherd.

I used to drive by a farm that had some animals including some horses. I grew up with horses and know a little bit about their care. These horses always looked terrible. Their living conditions were nasty. They were mangy and covered in mud. I never saw or met their owner but I know a little bit about him based on how he cares for his horses; his "flock."

But God is the Good Shepherd. He meets all our needs. Note the emphasis is on needs. I'm unaware of God meeting all our wants and it's probably good because we would be seriously spoiled and selfish sheep. But he does promise to meet our needs. "*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*" (Philippians 4:19)

### **God restores us**

"*He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.*" (Psalm 23:2-3)

Does this sound good to anyone? You don't have to be a sheep to like the idea of lying down in a green pasture beside the still waters of a lake. This is sheep language for poolside at a resort with an unlimited tab.

The reality for a sheep in Israel was vastly different. Have you seen pictures of Israel? It's very rocky. Water is hard to come by. A green pasture means food. Calm water means plenty of easily-accessible water to drink. What would you think of your shepherd if he regularly provided like that for you?

Many years ago, a classic book was written on Psalm 23 by Phillip Keller entitled *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Keller was himself a shepherd and writes about Psalm 23 with insights only a shepherd could know. A fascinating truth about sheep he highlights is that sheep don't easily lie down. They are timid animals and skittish. They will only lie down if four conditions are met.

- Free of fear
- Free from friction with others
- Free from flies or parasites [amen to that!]
- Free from need to find food<sup>1</sup>

Get that? A sheep will only lie down if it has complete confidence that all its needs are met. Essentially, it has to be confident in its shepherd. If you ever see a flock of sheep all lying down, there is a really good shepherd nearby.

*"He makes me lie down in green pastures."* (v. 2) His loving care for us and his promise to provide for us creates in us security and peace. Metaphorically, his presence and provision creates such freedom from anxiety in life that we can rest. God has it all under control. Good night.

Is your soul in a position of lying down this morning, or are you a stressed sheep today? Inwardly you haven't rested in months. Sheep make terrible shepherds. When the sheep think meeting their own needs is something they have to do, they are not depending on the shepherd. The result? No lying down. No sleep. Constant worry.

God wants us to live in the day-to day like a sheep truly trusting in the shepherd. Are you trying to be the shepherd? Do you think you have to find the next pasture? [In sheep voice], *what are we going to eat? How are we going to survive? Can we trust the shepherd?*

### **God leads us**

*"He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."* (v. 3)

That shepherds lead their sheep is self-evident. It is the path of righteousness that assures us. God gives us direction. He makes his will known in his Word. His will is a moral and spiritual will; a way of living and thinking. *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."* (Proverbs 3:5-6)

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, p. 35.

God is always leading; the question is whether we are following. His paths for us are right, just, pure, and pleasing to him. Is your life walking in paths of righteousness? We can't say God is our shepherd if we are walking in paths of unrighteousness.

Think of what Jesus said, "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*" (John 10:27) Sheep identify with their shepherd by following him. Notice, *it is for his name sake*. His name's sake is his glory's sake. God's glory is bound up with our spiritual life and health. A shepherd's reputation is on the line in the care of his sheep. God's glory is at stake. He won't lose one of his sheep. He is the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 to find the one who is lost. Even in Psalm 23 we see that *it's all about Him*.

### **God sustains us**

*"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)

You know, when you think about Psalm 23 and this pandemic that we're in today, I wonder if perhaps these are the most comforting words that Psalm 23 has for us. David imagines the worst moments we can have and describes them vividly as the valley of the shadow of death. Now, there aren't a lot of valleys in Indiana. The terrain here is very flat. But in Israel, to shepherd in Israel is to lead sheep up and down hills. I have personally walked some of this terrain, and you can't go far without going through ravines, gorges, and valleys; those deep places where the sun doesn't break through.

Does that sound like the life you're living right now? You're walking through a kind of valley where you don't see any light of truth or light of hope? Is your life a valley today?

While I'm sure this applies to those dark moments *at the end of life*, the language is more applicable to those dark nights of the soul *during life*. Valleys like we're in now. The valleys of life where everything seems dark, mysterious, uncertain, and fearful. This is such a vivid description of human emotional pain. Anybody in that valley today?

Need a little light? See that it says I walk *through* the valley. When we are hurting we can give in to despair and think the valley is a canyon; a pit. *I'll never get out. It'll always be this way! I'll always feel this way. I'll always have this pain. I'll never get over this experience! I'm stuck and I can't get out.*

Not if God is your shepherd.

If God is my shepherd, then I'm walking *through* this valley of darkness. We are walking, as a church, through this valley of this coronavirus. We are walking through this valley of not being able to gather together. We're walking through this valley of fear in our community. We are walking through this valley of uncertainty. This is not a canyon. This is not the end of the road. This is a valley that God, our Shepherd, is walking through with us. Please don't forget that.

I sometimes wonder what people do when they don't have God. Think about all the homes today, people semi-quarantined. And there they are day after day, hour after hour and there is no God in their heart; there is no God in their home. The secularist. The atheist. The agnostic. The evolutionary theorist. On the list could go with people who do not believe in the God of the Bible. And there they are. And what are they thinking? Where are they turning for answers because none of the things that they live by give them answers in times like this.

I think also of the many times I have done funerals for families where the funeral home calls and asks me to do it and if I can, I try to. I meet with the family and you can just tell there's no faith, no hope, no thought I might see this person again. There's none of that. They've been building their lives on a kind of mirage and you see it even in the services because where do they turn for hope? Who do they quote in the services? They'll quote Oprah or the individual's favorite country song and somehow try to derive some comfort from these things and yet there's no truth in it. The valley of death exposes it.

I think about what's going on in our society as all of a sudden, within these few weeks, everything has been turned upside down and things that used to seem really important now don't seem important at all and things we didn't even know about all of a sudden we're obsessing over. I mean all of a sudden, famous and apparently important people now seem so silly and trivial. So, for example, has anybody trying to keep up with the Kardashians? No. Now we are eagerly listening to people with degrees from Harvard in infectious diseases. And the rock stars right now are the epidemiologists. I didn't even know before this what an epidemiologist was. But now every day I'm reading and listening to epidemiologists and what they have to say about all that's going on. In a sense, I'm keeping up with the epidemiologists! And this virus and all of this has shown some things to be really superficial and some things to be super important.

And here the psalm says, "*For you are with me*" (v. 4). I'm walking through this valley of death and I know that God is with me as I do it. In the end, our confidence is in God's enduring presence with us.

The psalmist goes on to say, "*Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*" (v. 4) The Shepherd's weapon was the rod. It was essentially a billy club. David claimed to have killed a bear and a lion with one, so they apparently were pretty effective. If you are a sheep and you see your shepherd nearby with a weapon to protect you, how do you feel? Safe. Loved. Protected.

Recently I was in a situation I deemed unsafe. One of our members who is a secret service agent was nearby. I asked him if he would mind walking with me. This guy protects the President of the United States. He is highly trained and experienced, having done this all over the world. I knew he was packing heat, and frankly, knows what to do with it. How did I feel as he walked with me? Kind of like a sheep in a dark valley with my shepherd nearby wielding a rod and a staff. "*They comfort me.*"

### **God is My Host (v. 5)**

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

The language changes from shepherd and sheep to host and guest. God "*prepares a table before me.*" This is a meal. What is notable is where this meal happens. "*In the presence of my enemies.*" We don't typically eat in front of enemies or anywhere near them. It is hard to eat when you are under attack. But God can and will provide for us even when enemies circle around us like vultures. Even those who hate us can't keep God's provision from reaching us.

*"You anoint my head with oil."* Oil in ancient times was used to moisturize. In an arid climate, everything burned including skin. Ever have a bad sun burn? Ever put aloe cream on it? How does it feel? Awesome. His attention to our needs includes our physical comfort.

"My cup overflows" The cup was for drink. God is that host who keeps filling and filling. Bountifully filling. This means God has more supply than we have capacity. He overflows our lives with provision.

### **God is My Eternal Companion (v. 6)**

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*" (v. 6) Goodness and mercy. Other translations go with goodness and love (NIV) or goodness and loving-kindness (NASB). This is the Hebrew word, *Hesed*, which we will hear about throughout Psalms. It means steadfast love. Covenantal love. Sticky love. God's goodness and mercy are sticky. They will not leave us. Never ever. *"All the days of my life."*

Goodness and mercy have been called the hounds of heaven. You know what a hound dog is, right? A bloodhound is that dog that stays on a scent. Once it has a scent you can't get him off. And as he goes he bellows, RUR-RUR-RUR-RUR! All our lives we hear something behind us, something near us. RUR-RUR-RUR-RUR! It is the goodness of God. The mercy of God. Listen, can you hear them in your life?

He concludes with, *"I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."* Where is all this leading us? Eternal dwelling with God. Our greatest joy is knowing that this intimate relationship with God our shepherd will endure forever. He will never leave us nor forsake us and even death cannot end this relationship.

### **Learning From Psalm 23**

#### **Jesus is the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23**

While David may not have realized it, he perfectly described Jesus' ministry to us. Jesus self-identified as the Good Shepherd.

- *"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."* (John 10:14-15)
- *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."* (John 14:27)

All the qualities and blessings of Psalm 23 find their completeness and fullness in Jesus and his ministry to us. You can insert his name. *"[Jesus] is my Shepherd, I shall not want... [Jesus] restores my soul."* (Psalm 23:1, 2) If you like the shepherd of Psalm 23, then you'll love Jesus.

But this leads to a final application:

#### **For the Lord to be your shepherd, Jesus must be your Savior**

Everybody wants the reassurance of Psalm 23. People refer to it in times of trouble. They quote it at funerals. They quote it even during pandemics. Everyone loves Psalm 23. Does it apply to everyone? It does not. If Jesus isn't your Lord, then God isn't your shepherd. That is why the key word may be, *"The Lord is MY shepherd."* (v. 1) *My* means I am submitting to Jesus. Or to pick up the New Testament language, Jesus is your Savior. Before he can be

our shepherd, he must be your Savior. "My" personalizes this relationship. He is the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus said that to describe his sacrifice on the cross for us. He gave his life. He died for us. He died for our sins and our guilt.

Jesus becomes our shepherd when we make him our Savior by faith. And I wonder if perhaps today, with so many needs and so many uncertainties, that God might use this present trial to open your heart to the need that you have for Jesus to be both your Savior and your Shepherd. And I would urge you to put your trust in him so that from this day forward if you ever stopped and listened, you would hear: RUR-RUR-RUR-RUR! Oh, there's goodness! RUR-RUR-RUR-RUR! There's mercy, following me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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