

The Lord is My Shepherd

Psalm 23

November 18, 2018

Introduction:

Psalm 23 is without argument the most beloved psalm in the psalter and I would dare say possibly the most beloved chapter in all the Bible. It's one of the finest works of poetry ever penned, a psalm whose soaring magnificence and sublime beauty is recognized even by those who don't believe the Bible. It's often read at the bedside of those suffering and at funerals for the comfort of those who are grieving. It has been memorized by millions and has been a deep source of encouragement and strength for believers for centuries.

This is a psalm I love and I trust many of you do as well. So it is my joy and privilege this morning to invite you to open your Bibles to this wonderful psalm. We're going to delight ourselves in these comforting words from Psalm 23, which many of you undoubtedly already know by heart, but if you still wish to follow along, you can find it on pg. 458 of the pew Bibles. Let's read it together and then work our way through it section by section. So please follow along as I read Psalm 23 from the ESV.

“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.”**

The very first line sets the tone of the rest of the psalm, so let's take a look at that before we draw out any points. David says in v.1, **“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”** As many of you know, David was a shepherd in his younger years. He spent many long days and nights guarding his father's flock. So he draws on his experience, using it as a metaphor to describe how God looks after him.

Now I'm no expert on shepherding, having lived in a city all my life, but I've read enough about it to know a bit of how it goes. A shepherd is responsible for the well-being of the flock. He remains with the sheep in order to make sure they're fed, to pursue any that wander off, to protect them from dangerous predators, to guide them to new pastures as needed, and to care for their wounds if any should become injured. So when David says, "**The Lord is my shepherd,**" he's recognizing that God does something similar for him. How a shepherd cares for his sheep is akin to how the Lord cares for us.

But this also subtly says something about us. If God is like a shepherd, then that means we're like sheep, and that's not a very flattering description. You can use three words that begin with "d" to describe sheep: they're dumb, defenseless, and directionless. So for example, here's a real news story from 2005 that illustrates how dumb sheep are.

"Hundreds of sheep followed their leader off a cliff in eastern Turkey, plunging to their deaths this week while shepherds looked on in dismay. Four hundred sheep fell 15 meters to their deaths in a ravine... but broke the fall of another 1,100 animals who survived. Shepherds from a nearby village neglected the flock while eating breakfast, leaving the sheep to roam free. The loss to local farmers was estimated at \$74,000." ¹

So like lemmings, these sheep blindly followed after their leader to their death. Dumb! But they're also defenseless. Sheep aren't able to defend themselves in the wild, which makes them easy prey for wolves and other predators. Furthermore, they're directionless because left to themselves, sheep will wander off aimlessly and get lost, injured, or eaten. Given those three "d's," we're a lot like sheep, aren't we? We can be prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love. We're often weak and defenseless against those who would harm us, whether it be those who persecute us or the power of Satan waging war against us. And let's face it, we can be really, really dumb sometimes, can't we? So we need a shepherd to watch over us, and we have that shepherd in God.

But let's be more specific about who this shepherd is. Remember that Jesus took up this metaphor and applied it to himself in John 10:11, saying, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" So when David says, "**The Lord is my shepherd,**" we know that this passage finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Jesus is our good shepherd. Psalm 23 is ultimately about him. So as we go through this psalm, we need to do so recognizing this is speaking of how God shepherds us in Christ.

And what is the result of the shepherding we received? David says, "**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.**" When I was a kid, I was really confused by that last phrase. Why wouldn't I want the Lord as my shepherd? Why talk about all these great things the Lord does for us in this psalm and then say, "I don't want him." So to help any of you kids out there from being as confused as I was, let me restate this verse so it's a bit clearer for you. "**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not [be in] want.**" In other words, as a result of the Lord shepherding us, we shall not have any unmet needs. God will provide for us so that we're not lacking anything. David is telling us that God will provide for us everything we need, just like a shepherd does when caring for the needs of his sheep.

So what then does Christ, our Good Shepherd, provide for us so that we shall not be in want? I think there are five things we can identify in this psalm that the Lord gives to us that we need. But as I go through these, I want to personalize it because throughout this psalm, David doesn't speak of "us" or "we" or "they." He uses personal pronouns: "me" and "my" and "I." This is an intensely intimate, personal psalm and so I'm going to use personal pronouns throughout, speaking not so much of what the Lord does for "us" but what he does for "me." Since David made it personal, I want to make it personal as well. So the first point I want to make this morning is this...

1. The Good Shepherd gives me rest

David says starting in v. 2, **"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul."** This is a wonderful picture of calm and peacefulness. Green pastures and still waters means the sheep don't need to worry about food or drink. They no longer have to go in search for new pastures for nourishment. They can lie down. They can rest. After their travels, the sheep can be restored from any weariness they might have.

So also the Lord gives his people rest. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gave this invitation in Matthew 11:28, saying, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." I'm able to rest in God because of what God has done for me in Christ. I don't need to weary myself out with striving to be good enough in order to earn his favor. I no longer have to labor tirelessly to prove myself to God or others. I'm not weighed down with the burden of guilt and shame for failing to do what I know I should have done or for doing what I was forbidden to do. I no longer need to carry the responsibility for being good enough or moral enough to find security. My Good Shepherd has led me to a place of rest because he has done the work for me.

I can rest because Jesus lived the righteous life I should have lived. It's not up to me to pull myself up to heaven by my moral bootstraps. And I can rest from fear of God's wrath because Jesus suffered it for me. I don't need to have restless nights of dread and anxiety about God's judgment because in Christ, there's no condemnation left for me. Jesus paid it all. I can lie my head down on my pillow at night knowing that all my sinful debt has been paid.

Furthermore there's rest to be found just from the normal anxieties of life. Because I know that Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who rules as sovereign over all creation, can rest from any fear about what's going to happen to me in the future. If God is working all things for the good of those who love him, then I don't need to worry and fret over tomorrow. I can rest in his good, sovereign hand. If he never fails to provide for the birds of the air or the flowers of the field, how much more can I rest in his promise that he will care for me!

So let me ask you, are you resting in God right now? I know how easy it is to take burdens upon yourself but I also know God invites you to find rest in Christ. Rest in his care. Rest in his finished work on your behalf. Rest in his lordship over every

person and every situation you face. When life gets challenging, God is my rest. I know I can go to him to find still waters and green pastures for my soul. Admittedly sometimes I'm like a stupid sheep and refuse to lay down and find rest, but that doesn't mean the invitation isn't real. It's always there, for me, for you, for anyone who wishes to come to him, who wishes to be free of the heavy burdens of sin and the weight of the world and find rest and restoration for their soul.

But not only does the Good Shepherd give me rest, he also leads me on, guiding my steps. So the second blessing given to us by Christ is this...

2. The Good Shepherd gives me guidance

David goes on in v. 3 saying that, **“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.”** Shepherds lead the sheep and our Good Shepherd leads us. I look back over my life and I recognize how God has guided me down the paths I've walked. He led me to my wife. He guided me to Moody Bible Institute and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School as he led me to pursue a calling to be a pastor. He's guided me to the various churches I've served at. The events of my life are not an accident. I know the invisible hand of Christ my Lord has taken me down the roads I have walked.

But I want you to notice specifically how David describes the paths God has led him on. He calls them the **“paths of righteousness.”** The Good Shepherd is leading me to a life a holiness, of righteous obedience to him. In my life, far more than just leading me in the big decisions of life, I find God leading me to holiness. That doesn't mean I hear a voice in my head telling me to “Turn left” or “Turn right.” Rather, I hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit in the midst of my sin and temptation leading me to pursue repentance and righteousness. Sometimes that comes through an inner conviction, where the call to holiness is impressed on my heart, often as a result of reading the Word or hearing the preaching or teaching of Scripture. Other times, God has led me into the paths of righteousness through others. God led David out of his secret sin by means of Nathan confronting him directly. I've had men in my life who were used by God to point out my sin and lead me to repentance as a result. I meet with two guys for accountability and they have been instrumental in leading me into greater holiness. So God uses both the convicting presence of the Holy Spirit and the presence of godly men to lead me down the paths of righteousness.

So is the Lord leading you right now? Or maybe better, are you letting him guide you or are you resisting him, like a stubborn sheep? Your Good Shepherd is leading you to paths of righteousness: are you following him there? Are you resisting the guidance of the Holy Spirit that would lead you away from that sin that you've been engaged in? Are you neglecting God's Word? Are you avoiding the fellowship of God's people, especially those who, like Nathan, will call you out on your sin? God has called us to holiness and far more important to him than our success or wealth or popularity or health is for us to bear the righteous fruits of the Spirit. I see God continually as work in my life to lead me down the path of righteous living, and I trust you see him at work in you as well.

But also notice why God does this. David says the Lord leads him **“in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.”** While the paths of righteousness is of great benefit to me to walk upon, the ultimate reason God would have me be holy is for his names' sake. God's glory stands at the heart of why we ought to be righteous. We're to bring him praise by reflecting his image in us through our words and deeds. The fact is, I can pursue righteousness for my own sake. I can refuse to steal and lie and cheat and not commit adultery all for my own benefit, leaving God out of the picture entirely. I can live a righteous life for purely selfish reasons. That's the premise that lies behind the prosperity gospel: do this, or don't do that, so that God can bless you. But it's all about you. God is just a means to an end in the prosperity gospel. But Scripture calls us to pursue righteousness for his sake, in order that he might be glorified in us.

So a few more questions for you: when you do what is right, why do you do it? Is it a means to manipulate God, to put him in your debt? To get him to pay you back, sort of a “One good deed deserves another?” Is it to simply be thought of well by others? Or do you seek to obey God because you want to bring him pleasure by reflecting his goodness in you, regardless of whether it benefits you or not? God leads us in the paths of righteousness for his name sake. God calls his people to holiness so that he might be gloried through us.

But this doesn't mean then that God always guides us into places that are easy for us. Sometimes he leads us into dark valleys of difficult trials and sufferings. But when he does, he's present to comfort us. So our third point is this...

3. The Good Shepherd gives me comfort

Look at just v. 4 now. David says, **“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.”** God hasn't just led me to grass pastures, he's led me into difficult places as well. He allows me to experience trials. He tests my faith. He brings into my life difficult people and circumstances that aren't easy, that can aptly be described as walking through **“the valley of the shadow of death.”** But I don't need to explain that to any of you. We'll all been there. God doesn't promise us a life of ease. God leads us into trials and tribulations in order to test us, to refine our faith. The paths of righteousness often travel along the bottom of the valley floor.

I've had my share of hard times. Over the years I've encountered numerous people and circumstances that were no picnic to deal with. Yet when I look back on those valleys, I see a couple of things clearly. First, I see that those were the times when I grew the most. The valleys helped to shape me, to mature me, to make me more righteous. Did I like those situations as I went through them? No, not at all, but in hindsight, I can see the wisdom of God in guiding me through them. Like a tree, we need both the sunlight and the rain if we're going to grow. So we need both the green pastures and the dark valleys in our lives if we're to mature in holiness and faith.

But I also can see that I wasn't ever alone in the valley. Christ was always with me, always present to comfort me. I never walked alone because Jesus never left my

side, even if I couldn't see him for a time in the midst of my tears. It's like that very popular poem entitled "Footprints," that talks about how God carries us through the hard times. That's essentially what's being communicated here in v. 4. God was there to carry me through those difficult seasons of life, each and every one of them. And even when I couldn't understand why I was going through the valley, I was always aware that God would never let me go. He's been faithful to me in good times and in bad. I have found comfort in him, knowing that my Lord understands my weakness and suffering, because he experienced it as well during his life on earth.

So if you're going through a dark valley in your life right now, remember this verse. The Lord is with you. Your Good Shepherd is there to guide you through it, to protect you from evil, and to comfort you. You do not walk alone, in whatever you're facing. This psalm is so beloved by so many because not only have they found strength in these wonderful promises but they know from experience that they're true. I ask you, has not Jesus been with you in those darkest hours of suffering? I've sensed his presence throughout my valleys. I know these words are true because I've lived them. Have you? I may not know all the trials and tribulations you're experiencing right now, but I do know you should reach out to Jesus because he's there for you. He'll never leave you or forsake you. The valley you're walking through and the shadows that threaten to engulf you, are nothing to be afraid of because the light of Christ will banish the darkness and lead you safe out into the light once again. Cling tightly to Christ, your Good Shepherd. He will see you through whatever you are facing. He's there to comfort you, so go to him and find in him the comfort you need.

These are wonderful, beautiful words of consolation but in order to get through all the assurances we find in Psalm 23, I need to press on to the next way we're told that the Good Shepherd takes care of his sheep. So our next point is this...

4. The Good Shepherd gives me provision

Look back in your Bibles at v. 5. **"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."** This verse speaks of God's provision for us. The table that has been prepared is that of a feast. That it is in the presence of enemies implies that these enemies are defeated. It is as if this is describing a victory celebration, where the defeated enemies are captured and look on as the victors enjoy the spoils of war.

The mention of oil and an overflowing cup provides an image of joy and abundance. To have wine and oil aplenty is a sign that there has been a prosperous season, that the olives and grapes have been harvested in abundance. It's similar to what we're all about to enjoy in a few days: Thanksgiving. You don't have a Thanksgiving dinner with small portions of food. You feast on food with a whole turkey, with plates full of mountains of mashed potatoes, heaps of stuffing, and a variety of cranberries and other vegetables. Then dessert is offered with pumpkins pies and other baked goods. There's more food that you can possibly eat. Thanksgiving is a time of celebrating the abundant provision of God by feasting on the food he has blessed us with.

So that's the picture here. God has provided for us all we need. I look at my life and it's not difficult for me to be thankful for the ways my Good Shepherd has given to me everything I need and more. I am well-provided. And I don't mean just materially. My greatest blessings have nothing to do with anything that you could buy on Amazon or sell on eBay. God has provided me with a wife, three daughters, a sound mind, good friends, fond memories, and most importantly, he's allowed me to know Christ Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I'm well-provided for by my Good Shepherd. The one who richly dresses the flowers of the field and daily provides for the birds of the air has not failed to provide for me, his adopted child through faith in Christ.

But there's one more area Psalm 23 highlights for us that demonstrates the Lord's lovingkindness towards us and that bring us to our fifth and final point...

5. The Good Shepherd gives me hope

David concludes this psalm with these words of confidence in v. 6. He says, **“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”** These are words of hope, of looking to the future and having certainty that the Good Shepherd will continue to care for me for the rest of my life and beyond.

The first half expresses confidence in the inexhaustible goodness and mercy of God. If I think of all the goodness of God towards me, of how he has provided for me, how he has comforted me in the difficult times of life and how he has given me rest during times of peace and happiness, how he has been with me to guide me through all the paths of my life, I don't need to fear that it will come to a sudden end. The goodness and mercy of God that's been richly bestowed upon me up to this point will continue **“all the days of my life.”** It will never run out and I will not outrun it.

Notice how it says goodness and mercy shall **“follow me”** all my days? The Hebrew word there carries with it the idea of pursuing or chasing. It's not just a casual word, such that a stray cat might just happen to follow you while walking down the sidewalk for a while. Think of a police chase. If someone is speeding down the highway, the police will pursue him. They don't let up. They relentlessly follow after the individual until they catch up with him. That's what God does for us, except he's not trying to catch us to give us a ticket or arrest us. He's pursuing us to bless us. God's love for me is such that he will pursue me with his goodness and mercy even when I'm stupid enough to try to flee from him. The Good Shepherd is all about pursuing lost sheep. You and I cannot flee from his kindness to us. He'll always seek us out and continue to provide us with an abundance of goodness and mercy all the days of our lives.

But of course, it doesn't end when we breathe our last. David says finally, **“I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”** My ultimate hope is to know that what my Lord has done for me in the few short decades of my life is only the prelude and introduction to the grand novel of what awaits me in heaven. All the days of my life the Lord has been good to me and I'm confident that his goodness and mercy will be with me for as long as I live. But story doesn't end there. I will dwell in the house of

the Lord forever. My Good Shepherd said that he's gone away for a time to prepare a place for me, but that I will be with him in heaven, in glory, in a resurrected body, free of sin and sickness and death, for all eternity. He will not abandon me to the grave. Death will not be my end. Eternal life awaits. As musician Andrew Peterson once sang, "When you lay me down to die, you lay me down to live." We have life everlasting awaiting us, where we shall be with our Good Shepherd forever.

Conclusion

So what are we to do with the psalm then? We are to read it, meditate on it, delight ourselves in it, and set our full confidence in the promises contained within it. This is a wonderful, comforting psalm for funerals, but it is far, far more than that. In it, I encounter my Lord, my Shepherd, my guide and comforter. I need to hear this not just in times of suffering and death, not just in the valleys of darkness, but as I live my life every day, in good times and bad. I'm to be drawn to the One who pursues me with a relentless love and kindness. I am to follow his lead, to find rest in his saving arms, to find peace amid the dark and fearful trials of life, to go to him for comfort and guidance, to trust him for his abundant provision, and to hope in him from now to then end of my days, and beyond.

So then Grace Fellowship Church, remember the promises of this psalm always:

The LORD is your shepherd; you shall never be in want.

He makes you lie down in green pastures. He leads you beside still waters. He restores your soul. He leads you in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though you may be walking through the valley of the shadow of death,
you need not fear evil, for God is with you; his rod and staff will comfort you.

He has prepared a table before you in the presence of your enemies;

He has anointed your head with oil; your cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life,
and you shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Let's close in a word of prayer. Please pray with me.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.challies.com/christian-living/dumb-directionless-defenseless/>

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2018.