

The Lord Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23:1

Pastor John Miller

I want us all to read Psalm 23 together. I know we all have different translations. I'm reading from the King James translation.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Psalm 23 has been called the pearl of the psalms, a nightingale singing in the world's night of loneliness and need. The thing that amazes me is that David penned Psalm 23 over 3,000 years ago. Yet it is as fresh and as relevant and as comforting today as it was the day that David penned these marvelous words.

I believe everyone loves this 23rd Psalm. For many, it is the first piece of Scripture that we put to memory. For many, it is the last Scripture that is read before they die or at the graveside. But Psalm 23 is not about death; Psalm 23 is about life. Psalm 23 is about how the Lord our shepherd leads us, and guides us, and provides for us and takes care of us. It's a psalm, I believe, of life.

What are the psalms that we have in the Bible? Simply stated, they are songs. They were Hebrew poetry that was put to music, and they were originally sung. They were the Psalter or the song book of the Hebrews. The majority of the psalms were written by David. When David wrote Psalm 23, we are not sure. Some think he wrote Psalm 23 when he was a young shepherd playing his harp out in the fields. Quite often we see that portrayed in artwork in the picture of a beautiful pastoral land with the tree and the rock. David's sitting on the rock strumming his harp and the sheep groovin' with him as he plays his harp. His harp was plugged into a Fender amplifier; it was an electric harp. And he was jammin' with the sheep out there in the wilderness. They're worshipping God.

It could be that David wrote it as a young boy. We saw his love for the sheep and his protection for the sheep and his care for the sheep. He was reflecting that all that he was to his sheep, God was to him. The idea that God is our shepherd is very common throughout the Scriptures. It could be that David wrote this in mid-life; when David was in the heat of battle, when David had taken his sling and killed Goliath. David may have written it when he was fighting in the battles. So some feel it was written when he was playing his harp, and some feel it was when he was wielding his sword or the sling. Perhaps David wrote this psalm when he was in his sunset years when he was wearing the crown.

We don't know when David wrote Psalm 23, but if I were going to put it into a movie, I would have this psalm penned when David was an old man. I picture David sitting on the throne wearing his crown. He may not still be playing his harp, his sling is long gone and the sword has been laid aside. But he has on his crown, his hair is gray—I plucked a gray hair out of my head this morning. My barber said the other day, you're getting a lot more gray. "I know. I know. Don't tell me." I had this little wiry one that kind of stuck out like an antenna. It's like, "Lord, forgive me; I've gotta do this." Vanity.

We get old, and sometimes when you get old, you get sentimental. There is more behind you than there is ahead of you on this earth. You're looking forward to heaven. And I look back and remember that all the way the shepherd lead me. I look back at my childhood and at my parents and at my family and at my conversion and God calling me to the ministry and at all the years I've been a pastor and how God, like a shepherd, has lead me.

I picture David with gray hair, the silver crown upon his head, he's very old, sitting in his cedar palace, and all of a sudden David begins to be filled with joy. "The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. He led me and guided me." And David began to sing this psalm as he composed this song to music. So whether it was the harp and the sling and the sword or the crown, we do not know. But we do know that David was the author of Psalm 23.

We know David; he was the shepherd boy who became king of Israel. And we love the story of Samuel the prophet going down to the house of Jesse to find the new king. Jesse paraded all of his big, handsome, brawny, strong boys before the prophet so proudly. "Maybe Eliab; he's my oldest. He's strong and good looking. Look how athletic he is, and he plays football. This is a great kid. He can be the next king of Israel." And one by one they came before Samuel, and he thought, "This is the man." But God spoke to Samuel and said, "I don't look as men look on the outward appearance; I look in the heart. None of these are whom I have chosen."

So Samuel asked Jesse, "Do you have any other boys?" Samuel said, "Yes; the runt, David. But he's out there watching the sheep." David was the youngest, the runt of the family, and he had the job of watching the sheep. Samuel said, "We're not going to sit down until you call him." So they ran to get David. What was David doing? Naturally he was watching his sheep. And they said, "David, Samuel the prophet is at our house, and he's calling for you." "Me?" "Yes, he wants you. Come quickly." As David approached, the prophet heard from the Lord saying, "This is the man. Arise and anoint him." You can imagine that Jesse and his sons were awestruck as they saw this prophet stand up, take the cap off his horn of oil and pour it on little David's head as the oil ran down.

The Bible says that David was ruddy with a fair countenance. So it is believed that David had red hair and freckles. Picture this little red haired, freckled kid, ruddy of countenance, and he has this oil just running down over his head. God had called him from the sheepfold to be the shepherd of the nation of Israel and then to pen what has been the most beautiful song ever written. All the books ever written cannot compare to this one little psalm—six verses—that has brought so much comfort and hope and strength and encouragement to God's people for over

3,000 years.

So David cries, in verse 1, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Everything David had been to his sheep, God had been to him. This is a psalm for all ages; this is a psalm for the young, for the middle aged and for the elderly. There are two graphic pictures of God's intimate relationship with people seen in Psalm 23. Some people see three images: the shepherd, the guide and the host. Some see one image: the shepherd. I see two images here, and we're going to take it from that perspective.

First there is the shepherd and His sheep, verses 1-4; there is the host and His guest, verse 5; and then there is the summary of the psalm, verse 6: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." So first He is our shepherd and we are His sheep, then He is the host and we are His guest.

Today we are introduced to the main theme of this psalm, and it's in verse 1. "The Lord my shepherd." In the Hebrew that's the way it would read. Who is this Lord, my shepherd? I want you to notice in verse 1 that the word "LORD" is in all capital letters. It's in all capital letters because in the Hebrew, it is called the tetragrammaton. It's just the four letters YHWH. No consonants and no vowels. Why? Because they felt the name of God to be so holy that it should never be pronounced by human lips. So when they would come to this name, YHWH, since it had no consonants or vowels, they didn't know how to pronounce it. They would just bow their head and they would just say the name. It's probably pronounced "Yahweh," but we can't be sure. In our English, we have come to give it the word "Jehovah." You've heard the word "Jehovah." It comes from this YHWH.

What does it mean? It means "to be." The idea of God is "the becoming one." It conveys the idea of God's self-existence, timelessness and self-sufficiency. I realize that these are concepts that are hard to grab hold of and understand. But when we think about God, we need to think that God is self-existent; He depends on no one. If you ever hear a preacher say that God needs your money, forget about it. God doesn't need anything. He doesn't even need you to worship Him. "God, I really need to worship you." No. God gives to everyone life and breath and all things. He's the source, He's the sustainer and He is the goal of everything. The idea that God needs me or He needs my help—you know, if God needs my help, He's in big trouble. If you need my help, you're in big trouble, because I'm a flake. But God is trustworthy. God is the eternal, all-sufficient, self-sufficient, timeless God. He's the God of Abraham, and of Isaac and of Jacob.

Remember when Moses was called by God from the burning bush? Moses saw the bush burning, and he had to take his shoes off. God began to speak from the bush and said, "Moses, I want you to go to Egypt and command Pharaoh to release My people." And Moses said, "Who shall I say has sent me? I can't just go back and say a bush sent me. Not only a bush. A burning bush sent me. They'll think I'm crazy." God's response when He spoke to Moses from the bush was, "I AM THAT I AM. You tell them I AM has sent you." You go, "What kind of a name is that?" At least it's not "I was." God's not the great has-been in the sky. It's

not “I will be.” It’s the eternal I AM.

The best way to understand this concept of God, the great I AM, is to understand it is God saying I am whatever you need. With this name Jehovah or Yahweh, we have in the Bible what are called the “compound names of God.” Let me mention a few of them. What does God become for us? If you need peace, He’s Jehovah Shalom. That’s the compound name of God. That is the I AM your peace. I need peace, I want peace, I want the peace of God in my heart. The Lord is my peace. If you need provision, He is Jehovah Jireh. All these compound names of God and more are actually seen in this psalm: God provides and God protects and God heals and God restores. He’s Jehovah our provider, Jehovah Jireh. God is my provider.

This concept of Jehovah Jireh—the word actually means “God sees.” Wherever there is “God vision” there is God provision. The words Jehovah Jireh comes to me in “God provides,” but its origin means “God sees.” And the inference is wherever God sees, God provides. Sometimes when we pray we inform God and say, “God, do You see what’s going on here? God, do You know what’s happening?” Like God would say, “Oh, no!” Aren’t you glad when you pray you don’t hear God say, “Ooh!” God never says, “Wow!” God sees. God knows. God understands. And God provides. Have you experienced the provision of God in your life? Over and over and over and over again. Jehovah Jireh; the Lord is my provision.

Within our psalm in verse 1, we have Jehovah Rapha, the Lord my shepherd. Think about that. This self-existent God, this timeless God, this self-sufficient God, this eternal God—that He would condescend to become my shepherd. What an amazing concept: that God would take me as His own and be my shepherd, feeding me, leading me, protecting me. Now if the Lord is my shepherd—Jehovah Rapha—then the inference is that we are His sheep.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t think that’s flattering. Sheep are dumb, sheep are dependent, sheep are defenseless, sheep are dirty and sheep lack direction. Bless you. “Are you calling me a sheep, Pastor?” “No. The Bible is.” We are dumb; we need His wisdom. We need a shepherd. We are dependent. Sheep just don’t go off. You see a sheep with a stick over his back with a little I’m-running-away kind of bag? “I’m leaving the flock; I’m going out on my own.” “Good luck, little sheep. You’re gonna be devoured by the afternoon.” Sheep need to flock together. They need the protection of a shepherd. There are a lot of wolves and predators and dangerous things out there. Sheep have no defense. They don’t have horns or fangs. If you’re walking around on a dark night and you hear a “baaah,” you’re not going to freak out. If you hear a roar, you run for your life. So when you think of sheep, you think of weak, helpless, defenseless critters. We need God to protect us and watch over us and for God to provide and care for us. We all need a shepherd.

Super Bowl is coming up in another week, and everybody’s got NFL fever. They’re all psyched up about football. How many NFL teams are called “sheep”? We’ve got the lions and the bears and Seahawks and the Rams and all these really cool creatures. Can you imagine the announcer? “Ladies and gentlemen, here’s your team, the sheep. Baaah!” It just doesn’t speak of strength or power.

And sheep have no sense of direction. Sheep get so easily turned around and lost. When I was in high school, I was part of a future-farmers class. We had to deal with sheep and raise sheep, and I raised a steer. But I remember one rainy day the teacher asked me to go out and get the sheep into the barn. We had this big barn and about 30 to 40 sheep. I had to get them into the barn. I spent hours trying to get those dumb sheep into the barn, and I never did get them into the barn. I said, "You want to get cold, wet and rained on, you dumb sheep? Go ahead," and I walked off. Sheep are just dumb animals. They lack direction.

We need a shepherd. The shepherd we need is the Lord Jesus. John 10:11 says, "I AM the good shepherd. The good shepherd..."—Jesus says—"...gives His life for the sheep." There you have it. Most Bible scholars agree that "The Lord, my..."—Rapha—"...shepherd" is most likely fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Seven times Jesus said, "I AM." Not only the good shepherd but the resurrection and the life; the bread of God which comes down from heaven; the door; the way, the truth and the life. Every time Jesus uses that phrase "ego eimi," I AM, He was claiming to be the Lord Jehovah. So I AM the good shepherd or "the shepherd, the good one." And the good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.

There is something interesting about Psalm 23. It comes right between Psalm 22 and Psalm 24. I studied all week to figure that out. Psalm 22 is the psalm of the Cross. It opens up with "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" And all seven of the utterances that Christ made as He hung from the Cross and died are either found in Psalm 22, or the background for them is in Psalm 22. It's a psalm of the Cross. Skip forward to Psalm 24. It's a psalm of the crown. "Open up ye gates...open up ye doors." "Be ye lifted up, ye gates, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord mighty in battle." It's a psalm that is Messianic and prophetic, a psalm that looks forward to the coming of Messiah, when He will wear the diadem, the kingly crown, and He will sit upon the throne. But in between Psalm 22 and Psalm 24 is Psalm 23. It's a psalm of the crook.

So you have a psalm of the Cross, a psalm of the crown and then a psalm of the crook, where He becomes our shepherd, and He leads us and He guides us by quiet streams and into green pastures. He restores our soul. And even though we're walking through the valley of deepest darkness, we need not fear, for God is with us. The shepherd is our companion and our comfort. I believe all we need is Jesus as that shepherd of our souls.

In John 10:27-28, Jesus went on to say, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand." Our relationship with Jesus, the good shepherd, is both intimate—He said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me"—and permanent—"I give to them eternal life, they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand."

I don't know about you, but I believe the shepherd wants to be intimate with you. He wants to be your shepherd; He wants to lead you and guide you. You can have a very intimate relationship with God as the shepherd of your soul. But without Him, we're like sheep gone

astray. We turn to our own way. We don't have the wisdom for life, we have no way to defend ourselves, to feed ourselves, to take care of ourselves. We need to be dependent on God our creator, our shepherd.

But it's also a permanent relationship. Jesus said, "I give to My sheep eternal life, and they will never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand." In the Greek, it's very strong. It's what's called the "double negative": "No, never, ever shall anyone pluck them out of My Father's hand." "I give them eternal life, and they shall never, ever perish, and no one shall ever, ever pluck them out of My Father's hand." We are safe and we are secure in the hands of our good shepherd. He takes care of us.

Remember when David was talking to King Saul about killing the giant of Gath, Goliath, and Saul said, "You're just a youth; how can you contend with this giant?" He said, "I want you to know that when I was watching my sheep, a lion came to try to take my sheep. That lion didn't want to come back. I took care of the lion. I grabbed him by the beard, and I wiped him out. A bear tried to grab one of my sheep. They don't mess with me anymore. I took care of that bear. I took care of the lion, I took care of the bear and I'm going to take care of that Philistine."

Do you know that God takes care of your enemies? That God protects you and God watches over you? That God is caring for you? And that He never sleeps and He never slumbers? As we go through this psalm, we're going to see the shepherd's care for us.

Notice the second phrase in verse 1. Not only is the Lord—or Jehovah—my shepherd—my Rapha—but he says, "I shall not want." I love it. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." I've always loved Kenneth Taylor's living paraphrase. The Living Bible reads, "Because the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need." Verse 1 is the theme: "Because the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need." Another translation has, "I lack in nothing."

I heard the story of a little four-year-old girl in her Sunday school class, pigtails sticking out, and her teacher asked her if she could recite the 23rd Psalm. She gladly bounced to the front of the class and she started to recite the 23rd Psalm. She said, "The Lord is my shepherd; that's all I want. Thank you very much." She took her bow and sat back down. I thought, "That's good theology right there." That little four-year-old had some great insight. "The Lord is my shepherd; that's all I want." If I know that the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need. I don't know about you, but I've found that Jesus Christ is sufficient for all my needs. Whatever I need, I know that the Lord is my shepherd and that I lack nothing; He takes care of me. What an awesome thought.

As you look at this psalm, notice the things that the Lord our shepherd provides for us. We lack nothing. We shall not want for rest, verse 2, because "He makes us to lie down in green pastures" or "He makes me to lie down in pastures of green." Do you know that only God can give you rest for your soul? You can go to Walgreens and buy sleep, but you can't buy rest. You can't go to Walgreens and ask, "Do you have a 'peace' pill? My heart is troubled." You can get sleep, but you can't get rest. Jesus said, "Come unto Me all ye who are weary and heavy

laden, and I will give you rest." When you come to the Lord as your shepherd, you find rest for your weary soul.

Notice the second thing the Lord provides in verse 3: we shall not want for restoration, because "He restores my soul." The word "restores" in the Hebrew means that He "brings back." So when we stumble or fall or sin, He forgives our sin. The Bible says, "If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." How many times have we had to run to the good shepherd and say, "God, I'm sorry. Please forgive me." Then we experience the grace and the mercy of God when He washes us and cleanses us. And He restores us when we become cast, as a sheep would fall and not be able to get up. The Lord restores us.

Thirdly, we shall not want for righteous paths. Notice it in verse 3: "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." So we shall not want for rest, we shall not want for restoration and we shall not want for righteous or right paths. God is going to lead you. God is going to guide you. God is going to direct your life. When you're wondering which way to go, God will be your shepherd and lead you in righteous paths.

Then fourthly, in verse 4, when the Lord is my shepherd, we shall not want for courage and for comfort. It says, "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."—or literally, "though I walk through the valley of deepest darkness." Now this isn't just referring to death; this is also referring to dark periods of your life. We all pass through valleys of discouragement and despair. We all face times of darkness and doubt. But we don't need to be afraid. God is with us; our shepherd will lead us when life casts a shadow and we're filled with doubts and fears.

Maybe you're in a dark valley right now. Maybe you're discouraged. Maybe you didn't want to come to church today. Maybe God wants to speak to your heart that He's with you and He's not forsaken you. In those times when we feel that God is farthest from us, are the moments when God is nearest to us. He's promised, "I'll never leave you nor forsake you." David says, "Thou art with me"; we have His presence. "Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." So we have His comfort and His courage.

And fifthly, we shall not want for provision. I love it. The imagery changes to God the host and we His guest. Verse 5, "Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of mine enemies, You anoint my head with oil and my cup runs over." He doesn't just put a little bit in; He fills it and it overflows. Is your cup overflowing? When the Lord is your shepherd, you have an overflowing life. We don't want for courage and comfort. We don't want for provision.

Lastly, in verse 6, we shall not want for eternity. Because the Lord is my shepherd, "goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The house of the Lord is a reference to heaven. David now comes to the end of the psalm and says, "All my life goodness has followed me. Mercy has followed me. And one day when I die, I'm going to dwell in God's house forever and forever." And I shall not want for rest, for

restoration, for righteous paths, for courage and comfort, for provision and for eternity.

How could David speak with such assurance in verse 6? How could David say “I will” and not “I hope to,” not “If I’m lucky,” not “I might”? “I will, with confident assurance, dwell in God’s house forever.” The answer is back in verse 1. It’s a little word, the word “my.” “The Lord, my shepherd.” Did you notice he didn’t say, “the Lord, the shepherd”? He didn’t say, “my wife’s shepherd.” A lot of guys come to church because their wife makes them. Guys say, “I’ll go to church if you let me watch football. When you quit nagging me, I’ll go to church with you.” “Okay, okay.” You work out a deal. Maybe they’re saying, “The Lord is my wife’s shepherd. Maybe the Lord will let me into heaven because I’m married to my wife.” No.

He didn’t say, “The Lord is my friend’s shepherd. The Lord is my parent’s shepherd.” A lot of people grow up in church, and their parents love the Lord and are believers, but they haven’t yet been born again. I don’t care if you’re second, third, fourth, fifth generation Christian. I don’t care if your parents grew up in church and you grew up in church and you were dedicated as a baby. You must be born again. God has no grandchildren; only children. You must have your own intimate, personal relationship with God. David didn’t say, “The Lord is my friend’s shepherd.” He said, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

I agree with F.B. Meyer who said, “The dearest word in the entire psalm is the word ‘my.’” Notice the personal pronouns: verse 1, “my shepherd”; verse 2, “He makes me to lie down in green pastures” and “He leads me beside the still waters”; verse 3, “He restores my soul” and “He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake”; verse 4, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me”; verse 5, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over”; verse 6, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

There are two reasons we love this psalm. One is because it’s all about the shepherd. That’s why we love this psalm. When you read Psalm 23, it isn’t “Lord, plant me on a rock. Take my feet and put me on a rock. Lord, protect me from my enemies. Lord, bust their teeth in their mouths.” There are no petitions. There are no prayers. “Help me O God, for I am in despair. Save me, for great and many are my enemies, O Lord.” We love those psalms that say that, but how sweet is this psalm, because it’s all about the shepherd.

And secondly, it’s all about what He does for me. He leads me, He guides me, He provides for me, He comforts me, He protects me and He’ll take me home one day to heaven. That’s why we love this psalm. Those are two stand-out points about Psalm 23: It’s all about the shepherd, and it’s all about what He does for me.

That’s what the Christian life is all about: Faith looks to God. Faith rests in God. If the Lord is my shepherd, and I am His sheep, then He owns me. I’m His property. My problems are not my problems; they’re His problems, because I’m His sheep. So if you’re the Lord’s sheep, your problems are really God’s problems. So you can cast your care upon the Lord, knowing that He

cares for you. What makes this psalm so precious is that it focuses on the Lord, and it speaks about what He has personally done for me.

Remember when Thomas saw the risen Lord after His Resurrection? Thomas said, "I'm not going to believe unless I see Him myself and thrust my hand in His side and see the scars of the nails in His hands." Then all of a sudden Jesus materialized in the room, passing through locked doors, and Thomas saw the risen Savior. Jesus said, "Thomas, be not unbelieving but believing." What did Thomas say? It doesn't say it in the Bible, but I picture Thomas falling on his knees, and he did say these words: "My Lord and my God!"

I propose to you that you cannot say the 23rd Psalm and come to verse 6 and say, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" unless you can say, "The Lord is my shepherd." The only way for you to be able to say, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" is if you can say, "The Lord is my shepherd."

I heard the story of a young man who grew up in a small, country church back in the Midwest. When he was able to leave home, he took off for Los Angeles to become a movie star. He went to acting school, gained a career in acting, became famous, well known and rich and later he thought he would go back to visit his hometown. It was a Sunday morning and he went to church. After church they had a fellowship together, a potluck. While they were in this meeting downstairs in the fellowship hall, the pastor invited him to stand and give a recital. "Would you recite something for us?" The young man asked, "What would you like me to recite?" An elderly, gray haired saint of God, who had walked with God for many years and now sat at the back of the fellowship hall said, "How about the 23rd Psalm?" He said, "I'll do it on one condition: after I recite it, you recite it." So the elderly gentleman said, "Okay, you've got a deal. I'll recite it after you."

The young man stood up with pose and very eloquently and with great oratory in a clear, powerful voice and with great drama quoted the 23rd Psalm. Everyone applauded. It was awesome. Now it was the elderly man's turn, and he stood up and was kind of bent over, with his cracking voice and gray hair, he was able to bark it out. He quoted the 23rd Psalm. After he finished, there was not a dry eye in the place. Everyone was crying. The young actor stood up and said, "I think I understand the difference: I know the psalm; he knows the shepherd." That's the difference.

My question for you is: you might know the psalm, but do you know the shepherd? Are you able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd"? And if you're able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd," then, and only then, are you able to say, "I have everything I need."

Let's pray.