

The Lord My Shepherd

Psalm 23

Pastor John Miller

Psalm 23 says, "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 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 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."

The 23rd psalm is the most beloved of the 150 psalms, and very possibly, I believe, it is the best-known passage in the entire Bible. Kyle Yates said about this psalm, "More griefs have been put to rest by its sweet assurance. More sadness has been driven away. More confidence has been instilled than tongue can tell or pen can record. It pictures God in love with His people, with rest in His bosom, with grace for all of their needs." I like that. Psalm 23 is one of the greatest passages in all of the Word of God.

Psalm 23 was written by David, who was a shepherd boy who became the King of Israel. Samuel the prophet was sent by God to the house of Jesse to anoint with oil the next king of Israel, because God had rejected Saul. Jesse brought out all of his sons before Samuel. He had seven, big, strong handsome sons. The oldest son, Eliab, was shown to Samuel, and Jesse said, "This must be your pick. He's my first-born son." Then the Lord spoke to Samuel's heart and said, "The Lord does not see as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." So Samuel said, "No, it's not him," and Samuel went down the line of sons until all seven of them were rejected, to the surprise of Jesse, no doubt.

So Samuel asked, "Do you have any other boys? I know God sent me here to anoint the next king, and none of these boys are to be the king." I'm sure Jesse was thinking, Well, man, these are my oldest and best looking. Samuel said, "I do have one more son, but he's the runt, the youngest. He's out watching the sheep." Being a shepherd was the worst job that you could have in the family.

So they went out to get David. Samuel said, "We will not sit down till he comes here." So I can imagine they ran to get David. "David, David! Samuel's at our house and he wants to talk to you! You're the next in line to be interviewed for the position of King of Israel!" David probably thought, Me?! Are you serious?! He probably put down his harp and ran with his brothers back home.

And when Samuel the prophet saw David, God told him, "Arise, anoint him; for this is the one!" So Samuel rose, took the oil and poured it over David's head. I can just imagine David shivering as the oil was poured over him. He probably thought, One minute I'm watching sheep, and the next minute I'm standing in the presence of Samuel the prophet! I'm going to

be the next King of Israel!!

For a time David went back to watching his sheep and probably just dismissed the episode. But eventually God brought David and put him on the throne; he became the King of Israel.

Most of the psalms are written by this shepherd boy who was the King of Israel. God had anointed him king, because David was “a man after His own heart,” God said. That is a shepherd’s heart.

At what point in David’s life, as the shepherd-king, did David write this psalm? We don’t know. Some think it was when he was playing his harp as a young boy out in the wilderness. I can just picture David sitting on a rock overlooking the green pastures and his sheep, strumming on his harp and singing to the sheep. Then he realized that what he had done in love for his sheep, in protecting his sheep, God was his shepherd in watching over him.

Maybe instead of the harp, he had a sword in his hands. Maybe David was in middle age, when his strength was strong and he had his sword in the battle fighting the enemy. He might have come home after a day of battle and wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

But my preference is that David wrote this psalm when he was an old man. His hair is long over his shoulders, his beard is gray and his crown may be cockeyed on his head. And David looked back over his life. He remembered when Jesse called him. He remembered when the Lord protected him and his sheep in the wilderness from the lion and the bear. He remembered all the times that Saul pursued him and he hid safely in a cave. He remembered the death of his son, Absalom. He remembered all his sins that God had forgiven.

And the psalms are songs. They are Hebrew poetry. They were meant to be sung to the Lord. Then David began to pour out his heart to the Lord in this psalm. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” So I see David in his old age sitting on his throne writing this marvelous psalm. We don’t know when David wrote this psalm, but we do know that David was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable...”—no matter what kind it is: poetry, prophecy or literature—“...for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

In this psalm, David pictures the Lord as his shepherd; that everything he needed in life, in death and in eternity the Lord supplied. The Good Shepherd would meet all of his and our needs.

Now the theme of this psalm is in verse 1. “The Lord...”—notice it’s in all capital letters, “the Lord, Jehovah Yahweh”—“...is my shepherd; I shall not want.” The word “Lord” here is significant. It means “Jehovah” or “Yahweh.” It is a compound name for God. It is actually “Jehovah Raah.” In the Bible we have the compound names for God. We have Jehovah Tsidkenu, the Lord our Righteousness; Jehovah Nissi, the Lord my Banner; Jehovah Shalom, the Lord my Peace. So He combines His name with these concepts to indicate what He is to us. The name Lord, in all capitals, or “Jehovah Yahweh” conveys that great name of God: “I

AM.” In the New Testament, Jesus used it as “Ego eimi” or “I AM.”

In John 10, we know that this I AM or this Jehovah Raah is none other than Jesus Christ. John 10:11 says, “I am the good shepherd.” It actually says, “I am the shepherd, the good one.” There are a lot of shepherds who are bad, but Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus Christ, being our Good Shepherd, indicates that He is Jehovah, that He is Yahweh and that He is God. It affirms the deity of Jesus Christ, who is our Lord, our shepherd.

The fact that the Lord is our shepherd means that we are His sheep. Baaa! I say that to remind you that sheep are dumb—God bless you all—they are dependent creatures, are defenseless creatures and are dirty creatures. They’re not the fluffy, white, beautiful, little sheep you like. They get dirty out in the pasture. Sheep also are not highly intelligent. They don’t have any sense of direction. So the Bible likens us to sheep.

Have you ever heard of any NFL team called the Sheep? No. We have the Lions, the Bears, the Tigers, the Seahawks. We have all these great names for NFL teams, but not the Sheep.

So being a sheep is not flattering, but we are called His sheep, and He is our shepherd. The sheep were to be guided, provided for and protected. Jesus is our Good Shepherd; He guides us, provides for us and protects us through life, in death and even into eternity.

So verse 1 is the theme of the psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” The New Living Translation of verse 1 is, “The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.” I like that.

Now there are three areas that the Lord our shepherd takes care of that I want to break this psalm into. Number one, He takes care of our frailties. Number two, He takes care of our fears. Number three, He takes care of our future.

First, in verses 2-3, the Lord our shepherd takes care of our frailties. Sheep are weak. And notice as we read this psalm, all the personal pronouns David uses. “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.” So we see that He takes care of our frailties.

In Psalm 103:14, the psalmist says, “He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” So when you feel sometimes that “I’m so weak; how could God love me or care for me?” He knows your frame. He knows your weaknesses and frailties.

And there are three blessings that the shepherd supplies us in our frailties. Number one, He gives us rest. “He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters.” That is a picture of rest. And notice that “He makes me.” The King James Bible says, “He maketh me.” I like that. And when it comes to Psalm 23, the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer, give me the King James Bible. There’s no substitute for it.

Sometimes God will pull the rug out from under you. But He does it in love. He pulls it out lovingly to make us lie down. Sometimes He has to force us. You need rest, so you’re going to

the hospital for a few days. You need some rest, because you just lost your job. "I don't like that!" Well, the Lord wants you to rest. So the Lord will work in such a way in our lives to give us rest.

The sheep needed to have quiet, to have water, to have stomachs that were full. They need to lie down and rest. They also needed to be free from fear and free from hunger. The same with us.

You can go to a drugstore and buy sleep. But you can't buy rest. You can't find rest for your soul. That's why Jesus said, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Have you ever been weary? I have been weary; weary and burdened by life. You go to bed weary and wake up weary. Only Jesus Christ can give you rest for your soul.

The Bible says, "'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked.'" They are like a troubled sea.

So if you haven't found rest for your soul, it's found in the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. You must come to Him and trust Him as your Lord and Savior. He will provide you rest for your soul.

The second thing He provides for our frailties is He gives us restoration, verse 3. "He restores my soul." "Restores my soul" in the Hebrew means "brings back to health."

Hebrew scholars think this may be a connotation or convey the idea of forgiveness and restoration; that we are forgiven by God and restored by God, that it involves repentance, forgiveness and restoration. When we stumble and fall, He restores us.

They say that a sheep can eat too much, lay down and its equilibrium will shift, so it can't right itself and get back up on its feet.

I can almost identify with that. Years ago I was in a wedding of a dear friend before I was married. I was one of the groomsmen. They had the rehearsal dinner and served spaghetti. It was so good, that I ate and ate; I'm young and healthy. I ate so much that I sat on the couch for a long time until everyone was leaving. I asked my friend, "Can I spend the night right here?" I crashed right there on his couch, because I ate too much. I couldn't drive.

So the sheep get what's called "caste" when they can't get up. David asked, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him." He likened us to caste sheep when we wonder off God's path, get lost and He needs to bring us back and restore us.

In Luke 15, Jesus talked about the Good Shepherd, who would leave the 99 sheep and go to find the 1 sheep that is lost. That one sheep that is lost is you and me. We're all in the Bible. We're all black sheep. The Bible says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way."

But aren't you glad that Jesus is the "Good Shepherd"? He comes after you and me in love. He heard me cry, "Baaaa!" He said, "There's John Miller in a mess again. I need to help him out."

So Jesus leaves the 99 and goes to look for the 1. But if I were the shepherd in this story with 99 left, I'd say, "Forget the one black sheep. The dumb sheep shouldn't have wondered off in the first place! Good riddance!" You can be glad I'm not your shepherd.

But not Jesus; He puts them safely in the pen and then goes after that one that went astray until He finds it. Then He puts it on His shoulders, and He brings it back rejoicing.

How many times have we wondered off God's path? Have become "caste" and can't correct ourselves? We cry, "Baaa! Lord, help me!" He hears the bleating of His sheep and comes to our rescue. He picks us up, brings us back and restores our souls. All through life, what a blessed thing to have Christ as our Good Shepherd!

The third thing He does is He provides righteous paths. So He gives us rest, restoration and righteous paths, verse 3. "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." No sheep has any sense of direction; they get lost. That's why we refer to "lost sheep." But the shepherd leads us, guides us and restores us and brings us back into the fold.

"Paths of righteousness" means there are right paths and righteous paths. God's path is always right and righteous. And He does it "for His name's sake." That means "for His glory."

I'm becoming more and more convinced as time goes by in my own life as I walk with the Good Shepherd, that everything God does is for His glory. God will not share His glory with anyone. All praise, all glory, all honor goes to God. He sought me, He bought me and He saved me with His own blood. He gives me rest, restoration and righteous paths. He forgives me, restores me and He leads me—all for His glory. Praise the Lord!

The second need Our Good Shepherd meets is He takes care of our fears. We have so many fears in life, fears in death and fears after death. We have so many phobias. Sheep have no natural defenses. They are timid and fearful. And when they pass through the "deep, dark valleys," they need the shepherd.

Notice what He does for us to relieve our fears. We fear death. Notice the phrase in verse 4, "the valley of the shadow of death." Jesus gave His life for the sheep on the Cross. Jesus rose from the dead to conquer death and sin. And Jesus took the sting of death. So we don't need to fear death, and we don't need to fear life, verse 4.

The phrase "valley of the shadow of death" in the Hebrew is actually "valley of deepest darkness." Both interpretations are contained in this verse. It could be referring to death—and I think that's true—but in the Hebrew, it could have a broader interpretation; it could mean any time of deep discouragement, of fear or doubt, of physical infirmities or of grief or bereavement. Whatever our dark valley is, He is with us through that time. So we don't have to fear in life, in

death or in eternity.

Notice why we don't have to fear, verse 4: "For You are with me." We have His presence. Even if I'm in a dark valley of discouragement, even if all looks dark and dreary and I can't see what the future holds, I know who holds the future. I can rest in Him. Jesus said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we don't need to be afraid in the deep, dark valleys, because He is with us. Someone said, "I would rather walk with God in the dark than to walk alone in the light. I'd rather walk with Him by faith than to walk with Him by sight." That's trusting Him.

The second thing He does for our fears is He protects us, verse 4. "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." That's His protection. The rod was a club. The club was not for the sheep, praise God! It was so the sheep could look up and see the shepherd had a club to beat off the predators. David himself said that there was a bear that tried to get his sheep, and David killed it. A lion also tried to get his sheep, but he killed the lion. David did it all with faith in God and a sling shot. So the sheep could see the rod that was for their protection, and that gave them comfort.

The staff was for direction. It had a hook on the end of it, and when the sheep got off the trail, the shepherd would hook them and bring them back onto the right path.

Then, thirdly, we have His provision. So we don't have to be afraid, because we have His presence, His protection and His provision. Verse 5 says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over."

At the end of verse 4, there is a shift where David stops talking about the Lord, and at the beginning of verse 5, he starts talking to the Lord. And the image shifts from being a shepherd and the sheep to being a host and the guest at a banquet.

It's possible it is still a shepherd image here, but it is also possible that the image shifts to God as our host, and we're invited into His house. In the ancient world when you would go to somebody's house, they would pour oil on your head, wash your feet, give you something to wear and you would come in, sit down and they would fill your cup. That is a picture of God's provision.

This conveys another concept of the Lord Jehovah. The compound name here is "Jehovah Jireh." It means "God provides." An interesting thing about Jehovah Jireh is that the word "Jireh" conveys the idea of "seeing." Whatever God knows and sees, He provides for.

Have you ever had a need and prayed, "God, do You know what's going on down here?! Do You know that we have no money to pay the mortgage this month? Do you see the problems? Do you know what's going on in our bodies?! Do you know what's going on in my marriage?!" You cry out to the Lord. He sees. So wherever there is God vision, there is God provision. They're one and the same. Whatever God sees, He takes action and provides for.

So you don't have to doubt or question whether or not God sees what you're going through,

because when God sees, He provides. We have that name: Jehovah Jireh, the Lord shall provide.

In Psalm 37:25, the psalmist said, "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread." I like that verse.

I remember when I was a young preacher, I couldn't say that in my own experience, because I was young and hadn't yet gotten old. Now there are some blessings about being old. You gain a perspective on life that you didn't have when you were young. When you're young, you're energetic, everything's great, you're going to conquer the world and you don't know what lies before you. And when you're old, it kind of takes the wind out of your sails, but you look back and see the goodness of God, the mercy of God and you've learned a few things.

It's funny that when you get old and have all this knowledge, nobody asks you questions anymore! "Ah, they don't know anything; they're old!"

My Dad used to say, "I wasn't born yesterday!" Now I use that statement a lot. "I've been around the block; I know what I'm doin'!"

How important it is to realize that when the time comes and you're old, you look back and gain a whole new perspective on how good God has been. You then see how He guided you and provided for you and took care of you.

I like to speak to young people and tell them, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and learn not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." He will not disappoint you. He will not forsake you. He will not let you down. You can trust the Lord. Take that from an old guy looking back and seeing the hand of God. I've been young and am old, and "I've not seen the righteous forsaken" nor seen them "begging bread."

Paul, in Philippians 4:19, said, "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." So if the Lord is your shepherd, you have everything you need and you don't need to fear. You have His presence, His protection and His provision.

The third need our shepherd meets is He takes care of our future. He takes care of our frailties, our fears and our future. My favorite verse of this psalm is verse 6: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me..."—he makes it personal—"...all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." I don't need to be afraid of life or of death or of eternity, because "The Lord is my shepherd."

I believe verse 6 is a summary of this psalm. Many times in Hebrew poetry the writer would summarize everything that was said in the poem in one verse. Here David summarizes it by saying, "goodness and mercy...all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." So in life, two things follow me: "goodness and mercy."

And I also want you to notice that the "goodness and mercy" were also with him when he was in

the “valley of deepest darkness.” Whenever you pass through a deep, dark valley or you’re facing “the shadow of death,” God is good and God is merciful. In the Hebrew, the word “mercy” is “lovingkindness.”

How many of us can look back into those dark times in our lives and see that God was good, God was loving, God was kind, God was faithful, God was merciful?

I don’t know how dark your valley might be right now. You might say, “Pastor John, I can’t see anything. I don’t hear His voice. I don’t sense His presence.” Even when you don’t see Him, even when you don’t hear Him, even when you don’t feel Him, He’s right there. He promised. And He never breaks a promise. He said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” He’s with you in the valley. Notice it says that His “goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” How marvelous that is.

Not only in life but also in death He takes care of us. “And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” God keeps the best for last. You say, “I’m getting weaker. It’s getting darker. I don’t know what the future holds.” The future holds the Father’s house for all eternity.

Jesus said, “Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid,” John 14:27. He also said, “You believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house...”—that’s how He described heaven—“...are many mansions...”—or “abiding places”—“...if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also,” John 14:1-3. So Jesus said heaven is a real, prepared place. It’s home; it’s your Father’s house.

I like that David wrote this psalm way before what Jesus said in John 14. David said, “And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Notice what certainty he speaks of. “Surely goodness and mercy...I will dwell in the house of the Lord.”

D. L. Moody, the famous American evangelist, said, “With me, the Lord; beneath me, green pastures; beside me, still waters; before me, a table; around me, my enemies; after me, goodness and mercy; and ahead of me, the house of the Lord forever.” I’ve always loved that surety in which Psalm 23 concludes: “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

You can know where you’ll go when you die. You can have absolute certainty that when you die, you’ll go to heaven. You won’t get there by being good, or by trying to live a religious life, or by going to church on Sunday. Instead, the Father will ask, “What did you do about My Son?”

Have you trusted Jesus as your Savior? There is only one shepherd of our soul: Jesus Christ. He is the Good Shepherd, who gave His life for the sheep. It was at the Cross. Jesus willingly laid down His life on the Cross to die for the sheep so that we could be saved, be forgiven of our sins, so that He could become the shepherd of our souls.

You ask, “Well, how do I become one of His sheep? How do I find Him as my shepherd?” You first must realize you’re a sinner, separated from God. Then you repent of your sin. You receive

Jesus Christ as your Savior. And the Bible says, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Then you’ll be “in the house of the Lord forever.”

If you’ll turn from your sins to Jesus as your Savior, believe that He died on the Cross for you, receive Him into your heart by faith, He will forgive your sins, He’ll give you spiritual life—make you a new creation in Christ; “Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new”—and you have the hope of heaven.

The only way you can say, “I have everything I need,” in life, in death and in eternity, is to be able to say, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

Is He your shepherd? I’m not talking about your parents-shepherd, not your uncle-shepherd, not your aunt-shepherd, not the pastor-shepherd, but your shepherd—the Good Shepherd. You must be able to say, like the psalmist, that He “is my shepherd; I have everything I need.”