

Psalm 23

Few, if any, portions of the Bible are better known than this Psalm. Penned some three thousand years ago, its popularity persists. Why is that? As one writer (Scott Hoezee) comments, “It has all the hallmarks of an echo from a bygone era.” He’s right! We are urbanites who relate to high-rise condominiums and office towers, buses, LRT systems, super highways – the concrete jungle. The pastoral world of rolling hills and valleys dotted with sheep seems anachronistic to say the least. How many of us in modern western society relate to either shepherds or sheep? Isn’t it true that in our technological society we identify far more closely with doctors, lawyers, technicians, and mechanics than we do with shepherds? Aren’t we more familiar with police officers directing traffic than with shepherds directing sheep?

Nevertheless, we do relate to this magnificent Psalm. I think the reason that it still resonates is that we are caught up in a world filled with anxiety, fear, and grief. A fallen world is a foreboding world, threatening and dangerous. Sometimes we feel like sheep, lost and defenseless. Something deep within us cries out for a shepherd, someone to provide, to guide, and to protect us. Too often, we find ourselves in valleys of deep, dark shadow, even “the valley of the shadow of death.” “Even when we are alive and healthy, we traipse through the chill shadow that is cast by death on the far horizon of our lives. The shadow reminds us of where we are all headed” (Hoezee).

This morning, I want us to hear what David is telling us. He is saying that we can pass through such valley experiences without fear because the Lord himself is our shepherd. We are not alone! I would hasten to point out that you could not have a shadow unless there is light shining, and in Psalm 27, this same David reinforces what he says in Psalm 23: “*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*”

Psalm 23 is a psalm of trust and confidence. Its original setting is difficult to determine. Perhaps it is set in the wilderness at the time of David’s flight from Saul, or later, from Absalom. Whatever the setting may be, two metaphors characterize the Lord. First, David thinks of him as a *good shepherd* who cares for him (vv. 1-4). Second, he is like a *gracious host* who prepares a lavish banquet for him (vv. 5-6).

David’s picture of a good shepherd evokes memories of his own days as a shepherd (1 Sam. 16:19; 17:31-40). David had cared for his sheep, protecting them faithfully and skillfully. He told King Saul how he had often delivered them from lions and bears. Then, entering into Saul’s service, David had gone out as Israel’s champion to meet Goliath, an imposing giant, before whom Israel had cowered for forty days. David slew Goliath, thereby removing the disgrace from Israel and saving her from servitude to the Philistines.

David could not have foreseen that a thousand years later, the Lord would venture into the wilderness for forty days. There he would defeat Satan, the awful giant – more terrible than Goliath – before whom humankind has cowered ever since the Fall. We have a Champion, Christ the Lord, who skillfully and powerfully delivers us from servitude to Satan. Sometimes we are prone to forget this. We ought to pause and ask, “Are there *giants* before whom I cower in fear? Who or what is my Goliath? Have I taken my eyes off *my* Champion, *my* Good Shepherd, Christ the Lord?” David’s eyes were on the Lord!

Look at verse one with me. David does not think of the Lord merely as *the* shepherd in a collective sense; that is, Israel's shepherd. "*The Lord is my shepherd!*" It is of little benefit to think of the Lord in general theological terms. Unless our relationship with the Lord is *personal* and *intimate*, we will never be able to say, "*I shall not be in want.*" Our deepest needs are met, and we experience His unfailing provision and protection only as we cultivate our relationship with the Master. That's where David begins. "The Lord is *my* shepherd!"

Because David is able to make that claim, he can immediately follow with the bold assertion, "I shall not be in want." "Want" here means "lack." He is saying, "I will lack nothing I need." In Psalm 34:9-10, David speaks directly to us: "Fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing."

No Lack of Secure Rest

First, says David, he will experience no lack of secure rest. "*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.*" Any disturbance or intruder scares sheep. They are very fearful animals and cannot lie down unless they feel totally secure in the presence of their shepherd. David speaks of green pastures. Here the sheep lie down in restful security. It is restful because they don't have to worry about where the next meal is coming from. They are laying on it! Our God wants us to enjoy rest, as we trust in His provision for the future.

In Palestine, the pastures were seasonal, being "green" in winter and spring. In summer and fall, the sheep would be led to many places in search of food. God's care of us, however, is not seasonal, but constant and abundant. It is true that we go through "dry" seasons when we feel as if we are in the wilderness spiritually, but upon later reflection, we generally realize that our focus was not on the Lord and that we had inadvertently distanced ourselves from His provision and protection – like a sheep that had wandered away. But if we abide in Christ and trust in his provision for both the present and the future, then we experience rest. The one who trusts need not succumb to anxiety. Paul said:

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).

Next, David speaks of quiet waters. Sheep are afraid of fast-flowing streams. The good shepherd looks for peaceful streams that have a soothing effect and calm the sheep. Here in the western world, we are a people who travel in the fast lane. We are addicted to speed. We live under the tyranny of the moment and the compression of time. We need to learn to be still before the Lord and to wait upon Him: "*Be still and know that I am God*" (Psa. 46:10). "*Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord*" (Psa. 27:14).

Something wonderful happens when we are still before the Lord, and when we wait upon him. He restores our soul. He gives the enjoyment of life. He brings renewal and refreshment when we feel tired and spent. The Apostle Paul puts it a different way. He says, "*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day*" (2 Cor. 4:16).

No Lack of Guidance

There's more, however! Not only is there no lack of secure rest as we follow our Shepherd, but there is no lack of guidance. "*He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*" Jesus is the *way*, the *truth*, and the *life*. Does anyone want to know the way to live? For an understanding of how to live, we need look only to the Master and follow him. His ways are unfailing, leading straight to the Father.

No Lack of Protection

Now look at verse 4. "*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.*" The shepherd would lead his flock through ravines and valleys where the steep and narrow slopes kept out the light. David was familiar with deep canyons in the wilderness into which one might fall and not escape without help. The *valley of the shadow of death* can refer to any distressing time in our life.

The awareness of our own mortality often comes with sickness, trials, and hardship. The darkness of the canyons represents the uncertainty of life. We prefer sunlit straight paths, but there come times when we all must go through *dark canyons* of experience. God, however, is still present. His *rod* (club) and *staff* (support) are always at the ready to protect us and uphold us.

Nowhere in Scripture are we promised that God will not lead us into experiences requiring faith and courage. Nowhere are we promised exemption from danger. We may well have to go through dark canyons of experience – even the valley of the shadow of death – and we may even have to pitch our tent there for a season. But it will not be our permanent abode. We will go *through* it. We will be lead out safely by our Shepherd. That is why Paul wrote that:

"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

No Lack of Provision

Finally, verses 5-6 show us that with our Shepherd there is no lack of provision, or to put it another way, no lack of nourishment. The Lord is pictured as the host of a great banquet (Isa. 25:6-8) prepared for his sheep. Typically, an honored guest in the ancient Middle East would be anointed with oil (made by adding perfumes to olive oil) by the host before entering the banquet hall (cf. Psa. 45:7; 92:10; 133:2; Amos 6:6; Luke 7:46).

Hosts were also expected to protect their guests at all costs. Our God offers the protection of a host even when our enemies surround us and press in upon us.

The overflowing cup is a picture of God's abundant provision. It is "running over!" The Hebrew word carries the idea of being *saturated*. One might think of a sponge that soaks up the water until it can hold no more – it is saturated – and begins to overflow. Or, there is the image of a cup that is filled to overflowing. Christ was never stingy in his provision, but always gave abundantly. Moreover, he did not allow quality to suffer at the expense of quantity. His provision is both quantitative and qualitative (consider John 2, the water to wine, and John 6, the feeding of the 5,000).

Look at verse 6. The one who follows the Good Shepherd will discover to his delight that he is being *followed* by goodness, mercy, and loving kindness. The word translated “follow” literally means to *pursue* or *stalk*. God loves his children so much that he stalks us with his goodness, mercy, and loving kindness. What a turn around for David. He had been stalked and pursued by Saul and Absalom. Now he realizes that God is pursuing him, both as a good Shepherd and a gracious Host. No longer stalked by hatred, but by love!

Finally, the One who pursues us with divine love and goodness will never stop. For David, it would be his portion “*all the days of my life.*” Then, when this earthly life was over, he would dwell in the house of the Lord (literally, in God’s household or home) forever. Earthly life ends with a homecoming!

The world and our culture have changed much since the time when Psalm 23 was written. But it is just as relevant today as when David penned it 3,000 years ago. Everyone needs a shepherd. Christ is that Shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The shepherd’s crook is now in the shape of a cross leading us on, prodding us, protecting us, and taking us home in the end. With David, we can confidently say, “The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not be in want.”