

# Walking with the shepherd

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Psalm 23. Let me invite you to turn to Psalm 23 as we consider the Lord as our Shepherd. To preach on Psalm 23 is to go to some familiar ground in some ways and as I've studied Psalm 23 over the years, realize that there is so much more to it than the initial reaction that we have when we read its peaceful words and its comforting instruction to us; there is so much more to it. Underlying those familiar words are great profound truths that truly are an anchor for the soul. Let me read Psalm 23 as we begin and then we'll try to unpack it in the next 50 minutes or so, conservatively estimated there. Psalm 23,

1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. 3 He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me;

Right there is the key to that whole Psalm, "You are with me."

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Theologians use the term "omnipresence" to refer to the fact that God is everywhere present in his creation and that thought, that truth about the ever present nature of God when you walk it through and work through the implications of that, it has massively important implications for how you live the Christian life and this is what Psalm 23 does for us. It takes the reality of the omnipresence of God, as Lynn sang, he is here. Everywhere we go God is with us and for those of us that know Christ, it means that he is with us from a position of our heavenly Father. He is with us with an attitude and a disposition of favorable blessing toward us and Psalm 23 works out the implications of what that means for us. This is a Psalm of peaceful confidence that is the ground and the foundation of our walks with Christ. This sets the context for everything.

When David says, "The LORD is my shepherd," he's using a metaphor. He's using a word picture to illustrate spiritual truth. The image of a shepherd was something that

David, of course, was very familiar with. David was a shepherd in his own younger days. That was his occupation when the Lord called him to be the King of Israel and so he's speaking out of a familiar imagery that he knew from his youth. When he says, "The LORD is my shepherd," what he's saying is, "God is like a shepherd to me and because God is like a shepherd, I will not lack for blessing and his protection in my life."

What does that mean? Most of us, certainly those of us that grew up or have connections in Southern California, we have no concept really of what it means to be a shepherd. We haven't spent our lives working with sheep and so you look outside the exact biblical text for some background information and here's what one source said about the role of a shepherd in relationship to the sheep. This is the factual reality that underlies the metaphor that David uses to express his relationship with the Lord and I quote, it says, "By day and by night, the shepherd is always with his sheep and is constantly providing for them. He is not only ready to protect them but he conducts them to the most suitable ground by the best way. He leads them at noon to the shelter of a cliff or to the shade of a tree beside the brook and in every possible way lives among them and for them. At sunset, he conducts them back to the fold where during the night they may lay down in safety. The shepherd comes to know his sheep very intimately."

It's the nature of a shepherd to be with his sheep. It is the nature of a shepherd, a literal shepherd with literal woolly sheep in the land area of Palestine and in the area of Israel, the shepherd would go with his sheep and he would lead them as a flock to the places where they needed to be. Lead them to places of shade in the hot sun. Lead them to water when they needed water. Lead them to places where they could graze when it was time for them to eat. And at nighttime, he would lead them to a place of protection where he was always watching over them, protecting them from external threats and also leading them to the place where they would have the provision that they needed at all times. It was his constant goal, it was his constant responsibility, it was his constant willingness to be with those sheep so that they would be properly cared for.

That's what David is saying it's like to walk with the Lord. David is saying, "That is the kind of relationship I have with Yahweh, with the God of the Bible. He is like a shepherd to me." And he says, "When I consider my life and the reality of the Lord's omnipresence, the fact that he is always with me and that he is favorably disposed to me with a motivation of protection like a shepherd has for his sheep," he says, "I know that I'm always under his care and therefore I am confident that it will always be well with me despite the threats that are around me and the difficulties that I may go through." That's what he's saying in an overview fashion. David is presupposing the sovereignty of God, the fact that God exercises control over his creation, and he is presupposing the omnipresence of God. You could say it this way, David is saying, "Look, God is in control. God is with me and God loves me. When you put all of those things together," he says, "I live in a position of confidence. I live in a position of trust."

Now, when you read through this Psalm rather quickly there's an important aspect of it that might slip your notice as you're thinking about the shepherd and the shepherd imagery and thinking through that. This is an incredibly intimate Psalm. In this Psalm in

the English text that we have here before us, David uses the first person singular pronoun: I, me, my. He uses that first singular personal pronoun 17 times in these 6 verses. He's not talking about God as the shepherd of the nation of Israel, the Bible uses that language, but David has taken that concept of God as a shepherd and he's not thinking about it in a corporate sense, he's thinking about it in an individual sense. He has taken the realities of these spiritual truths of God's control, God's sovereignty, God's love and omnipresence in general and he has applied them personally to his life. This is given to us in the Scriptures that we would make the same kind of application in our own walk. When you study Psalm 23, when you understand the message of Psalm 23, you realize that this is the area of confidence and peace that we are intended to live out our spiritual lives as those who know Christ. So what David does here is he takes this concept, he takes those theological truths, and then he just starts to unfold them; he starts to unpack them. He works through what that means for his life. If God is like a shepherd for him, then that has very specific applications for the way that he views his relationship with God vertically and how he walks about in this life.

So we're just going to work our way through this Psalm here this morning. There are 2 main points here this morning. First of all, the first main point is that God is your shepherd. If you have turned from sin and put your faith in Jesus Christ there is a remarkable conversion that has taken place. I realize it's common to think about salvation simply as having at a moment in time you were delivered from the sentence of hell and now you're on the path to heaven and there's truth to that but that is such an incomplete view of what salvation means and over the months and years to come, we will work our way through those various doctrines. But today our focus is that one of the things that happens when someone truly comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ is that there is a total reorientation of their vertical relationship with God, the total reorientation of what it means to walk in God's creation because once you have been delivered from sin and judgment and God has made you a new creation, it changes the nature of the way that he deals with you. No longer are you under his wrath, you are under his favor. You have been reconciled to him and as a result of that, God exercises his control in a manner designed to be a blessing to you. Instead of being the object of his wrath, you are now the object of his favor and care. That is what we're going to see worked out for us in this metaphor of the shepherd.

So there are 3 sub points here to God is your shepherd. First of all, if God is your shepherd, it means that he provides for you. He provides for you. That would be the first sub point if you're taking notes. Look at verse 2 here as we start to make our way through the text. "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want," and because the Lord is my shepherd that means he provides for me. That's what a shepherd does for his sheep, he provides for them. He makes sure that they are cared for. In verse 2, David says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters." What is he saying here? Well, these verses and this verse in particular, develops the role of the shepherd. David is speaking in confidence about the guidance and the spiritual refreshment that the Lord will give to him. He's not saying that, "God literally makes me lie down in a pastor and literally leads me to drink." He's using the image of the agrarian nature of a shepherd to illustrate spiritual truths.

Now, what he's talking about in the reality of a real shepherd with real sheep, he's talking about the nature and he's alluding to the fact that in that area of the world, green pastures were a seasonal phenomenon. The fields weren't always green with full grass. The fields were green during the winter and spring but as it is in Southern California, there's a dry season that extends for several months and the fields turn brown. In summer and fall, the hills get brown and the shepherd has to lead the sheep, the flock of the sheep, from place to place to find a place for them to be able to graze and to be able to have the food and the nourishment that they need. Now here's the point: the sheep rely on the shepherd to provide what they need especially in those times of scarcity. When the fields are brown, the shepherd knows where to go to find the fields that they need to graze in and so he leads them there, leads them through the dry barren places in order to get to a place where they can have the food that they need and find the grazing that they need.

In a similar way, look at verse 2 with me again, he says, "He leads me beside quiet waters," speaking of the fact that it's not just food but the shepherd would lead the sheep to find the springs or the wells where the sheep could drink without being rushed. They were able to peacefully, in an unhurried way, be able to get the drink that they need. This was the daily needs of the sheep. And so when you combine that with the green pastures, you realize that he's setting forth an image of a shepherd that is leading his flock in order to meet all of their needs and that he was aware of their needs and he moved them to the place where those needs could be met. That's the picture of the shepherd that he's using. The shepherd provides his sheep with rest, with green pastures and with quiet waters. That's what a literal shepherd does with his literal sheep.

Now, understanding what David is doing here, what he is saying is that, "That is how the Lord cares for me." That is how the Lord cares for his people. He moves us from place to place, not necessarily geographically but as we go through life and we go through the different circumstances, what David is saying is that, "The guiding hand of God is upon me and there is an intentional direction that God is supplying even if I don't always see it. Even if I don't always know what he's doing or where the next field of opportunity or the next field of services, I'm confident that the Lord is leading me where I need to go so that he will provide for me as we're in transition and as we reach the destination." David is saying that, "God intentionally and knowingly guides my life by his unseen hand, by his unseen providence." And David has an absolute assurance that Yahweh is in charge of his life, is directing his life and is conducting him to the place that is going to be blessing in the end.

Now, what does that mean for us? These are permanent truths and when you are a believer in Christ and when you walk in obedience to Christ, the power of this Psalm is overwhelming. Despite the pastoral nature and the peaceful setting of it, there is a spiritual power in this that is just magnificent because when we come to those times of need, when we come to those times of sorrow, when we come to those times of uncertainty where you just don't know how it's going to work out and you look all around and all around that you see is a barren landscape, spiritually speaking, that says, "Where could this possibly be going? How could this possibly come out good in the end?" Well,

what David is saying is to step back and take a view of God as your shepherd and to remember that sometimes the shepherd has to conduct the sheep through barren ground in order to get them to a place where food and rest and provision is available and sometimes the guidance of a shepherd takes his sheep through barren land and in the same way in our lives, sometimes the guidance of the Lord is going to take us through barren land. When you know that in advance, it gives you an opportunity to view it from the right perspective. The barren land is not a sign that something has gone wrong. When the sheep are with the shepherd, everything is under control. The shepherd is guiding and directing. Well, in the same way in our lives even though we don't have the privilege of seeing a visible shepherd guiding our lives through these different areas, through these times of sorrow and so forth, what the Scriptures would call us to do is to remember that the sovereign, omnipresent, loving God is acting as a shepherd in your life and if you're going through a barren time in life at the present time, is to realize that there is a greater transcendent reality that the shepherd is conducting you through that.

That is what this means and where God has led, God will provide. That's what David is saying here. He says, "I have a personal, intimate confidence in God as my shepherd that I can go through even barren times knowing that he is ultimately going to lead me to green pastures. He is ultimately going to lead me to those quiet waters because that's what a shepherd does. It could not come out any other way." It could not come out any other way. As a result of this and I say this gently, being mindful of some of the trials that are represented in this room both past and present: when you understand what David is saying here, you realize what it means for the Lord to be a shepherd in your life. First person singular, my shepherd. He leads me. Well, here's what that means: your confidence in the future does not come from knowing how your present issues are going to work out. That is not the ground of your confidence. You do not have to see how these issues work out in order to have spiritual confidence. Your confidence comes from the fact that you know that the sovereign, loving, gracious, wise, good God is your shepherd and he is conducting you through the terrain. Even when it is rocky terrain, even when it is treacherous terrain, the hand of God, the unseen loving hand of God is guiding you because that's what a shepherd does.

It couldn't be any other way, beloved. Do you see that? It could not be any other way because for it to be any other way than for God to be guiding us as believers in Christ, to be guiding our lives and to have his hand upon us and leading us through that brown, barren, dry terrain, for it to be any other way would be a violation of his faithfulness and that's impossible. God does not violate his own faithfulness. God does not violate his goodness to his people. A shepherd doesn't violate the trust of the sheep. He does not do that. He does not do that. He does not do that. God is always faithful to his people just as a shepherd is always faithful to the sheep and that is the ground of our confidence. Not seeing how this particular predicament works out. That's never the ground of our confidence. It's never evaluated by circumstances at all. We look past our circumstances to see who our shepherd is and we say, "Oh, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." That is the spiritual confidence that is the prerogative, privilege and responsibility of every believer in Christ. This isn't reserved to particularly spiritual people. It's not reserved for seminary professors. It's not reserved for pastors. This is your birthright as a

Christian, to live life with that kind of confidence in a sovereign God. That's a glorious place to be, huh? That is a great place to be.

Now, he is leading us; he provides for us, I should say. Now secondly, kind of along those same lines is this: the shepherd provides for the sheep, secondly, he guides you. He guides you. In verse 2 we saw the provision of the shepherd: he provides for the grazing and the water that they need. Now in verse 3, look at this, David says, "He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake." One of the things that a shepherd does is that he restores the injured sheep. Sometimes he would even pick them up and carry the sheep on his own shoulders. A shepherd would nurse ailing sheep back to strength because that's part of what the shepherd does. It's part of his provision is that he cares for them when they are injured. He cares for them when they are ailing, when they are sick. So a shepherd takes a sick sheep and restores him.

Then when the sheep is restored, verse 3, "He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake." You can see there in verse 3, look at it with me, when he says, "He restores my soul," there is one of the indications right in the text that David is speaking in metaphorical ways, not talking about God being a literal shepherd, of something physical, but God is the shepherd of his soul. What he's saying there is that, "When my soul is weak, when my soul is broken, when my heart is crushed under the weight of difficulties, I have confidence that in time, over time, in his wisdom, the Lord is going to restore my soul and bring it back to a point of health. In the midst of my sorrows and discouragements and confusions and the sins and temptations that I find myself battling and resisting and often failing in," he's saying, "I have confidence that my shepherd is going to lead my soul from this place of want, this place of discouragement, he is going to lead me ultimately to a place where my soul is fresh and encouraged and confident once again." It's not that his soul is always in that position but the shepherd is always over his soul leading him to that ultimate outcome. He restores my soul; He brings me back to spiritual health and if you're feeling the weight of a discouraged heart these days, just realize that if you're a believer in Christ, the Lord is not going to leave you there forever. The Lord is not going to leave you and abandon you to a place of despair. That's not what a shepherd does. That's not what the Lord does with us. He restores our soul.

So there is an underlying confidence that is in this Psalm that says, "Even when I am weighed down, I am confident of ultimate restoration because that's what a shepherd does." And do you see, my brothers and sisters in Christ, do you see how a knowledge of God transforms your entire approach to life? Rather than collapsing under the weight of very difficult trials and circumstances, there is an undergirding confidence that comes from this knowledge of God and this confidence of who he is and the way that he deals with his people. I think where the disconnect sometimes comes for us is that we know that in general we would say these things in general but when it comes to taking those things that are in general or on the shelf, pulling them off the shelf and bringing them into our own lives, that's where the disconnect lies. That's where we, you know, "I can see this in general but I'm not sure about me. I'm not sure that the Lord is going to deal with me that way because this is too hard. This is too difficult." Well, when you understand

these things, you realize that the opportunity is to say, "No, the Lord is going to guide me through this and what some people know in general is something that I know personally. It is something that I trust and I bank my very life on personally," you say to yourself. "I bank my life on this personally that what God has said about himself in Scripture, now that I belong to him through faith in Christ, that's going to be true in my own experience and therefore I'm confident. Therefore I can have trust in him even in the midst of the sorrow."

Now, go back to verse 3 with me. He says, "He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake." There is so much in this verse. It's so magnificent. First of all, notice he says, "He guides me." He's personally guiding me through his providence. He guides me, first person singular. It's not that he just guides his people, he's guiding me through these things even though it's bewildering at times. It's not only bewildering circumstances, sometimes it's bewildering on how to pronounce that word, bewildering.

He's guiding me in the paths of righteousness. Now, the paths of righteousness there can also be understood as the right paths. A lot of commentators view it that way, "He guides me in the right paths." In other words, understood this way, God is guiding me in the proper way so that I reach the right destination in the end. He guides me in the right paths just like a shepherd knows the right way to bring the sheep to the place that they need to be for their provision, David says, "I am confident that the Lord is going to guide me by the right way to reach the ultimate destination for my soul even if I don't always see where that path is going at the time. It's not because I see the path, it's not because there is a 6 lane paved highway in front of me and I can see all the way to the horizon. It doesn't work that way," David is saying, not that he knew 6 lane paved highways 1,000 years before the time of Christ but David says, "When the path is turning and twisting, I know that he's guiding me rightly because it has to be that way. It has to be that way because of who Yahweh is, because of who my God is. He's my shepherd. He's good. He's in control. He knows. He's wise and I'm following him." That is the grounds of his confidence.

The shepherd, get this, the shepherd knows what lies ahead. The shepherd knows the terrain. The shepherd sees farther than the sheep do. I'm having all kinds of trouble with grammar and pronunciation here today. That's okay, we love each other, right? The shepherd knows the terrain and he knows how to lead the sheep in the best way to get to the destination. That's the point. The sheep didn't know the destination. Sheep are dumb animals. Sheep don't know their left hoof from their right hoof if they have hooves, I don't know. But the shepherd does. The shepherd knows the terrain and all the sheep need to do is to follow him and they would arrive where they needed to be because the shepherd would never lead them astray. That is the assurance that you have as a believer in Christ, that you have that same kind of personal, providential direction in your life as you are immersed in the word, as you are living obediently to Christ, the Lord is going to use all of that to direct you in the right path.

Now, how certain is this? How certain is the goodness of the Lord's leading? Look at the end of verse 3 again. I told you there was a lot here in this verse. It's not only the personal

guidance in the right way at the right time. Do you want to know how certain it is that the Lord is going to lead you properly as a believer in Christ even if you don't understand at the moment? Look at the end of verse 3, why does he do this? "He guides me for His name's sake." This is astonishingly transforming. What David is saying here is that God has tied his own honor into the proper leading of your life. God guides you in order that his name would be glorified through your life and because God is committed to his own glory, the manifestation of his own glory, the upholding of his own honor, David is saying that, "God stakes his own honor on how he leads me." God stakes his honor on being faithful to his people and that leads you to a position of confidence because the certainty of God's glory is the guarantee of the certainty of his blessing on his sheep. Just trust him and follow him. Just trust him and let him lead you. David says, "The Scriptures say that God will honor his name through the leading of his sheep and the providential leading of them."

It's not just a matter, get this, it's not just a matter of you and me and our own internal reactions to life and spiritual reality and it's not just about your blessing. There is a much greater principle that is at stake and that is at work and that is in operation in the unfolding of your life. The glory of God is the principle that is ultimately at work in the life of the believer and sometimes God chooses as he did with Job and as he did with Christ and as he did with the Apostle Paul, sometimes God puts his glory on display in our lives in the midst of very difficult circumstances. Christ was crucified. Christ hung on a cross and God was being glorified in that most dark hour.

So we have to view these things differently. We have to view them not from the perspective of how it affects us but to realize that there is a transcendent principle at stake and that somehow through my life, God is going to guide me rightly. God is going to guide me properly because the ultimate outcome that he is committed to is the glory of his own name. He does it for his own name's sake and all of a sudden what that does for you is it connects your sorrows and your individual trials that you go through, it connects us to a greater overarching principle. There is a greater principle at stake than just my circumstances. The greater principle as I go through these difficult times, they are connected to an overarching, fundamental, greater principle of the glory of God.

So as sheep in response to their shepherd, sheep don't resist their shepherd. The flock never called out to a shepherd leading them through the hill country of Judah, "Hey, we're going the wrong way here." They don't do that. They just implicitly trust where he's going. They trust him to lead them. They don't resist the shepherd. And let me say this to you, beloved, because I know some of the difficulties that you're in right now today even. Here's what I want to assure you from God's word, let's look at verse 3 again before I say this. I'll put my finger in my notes so I don't forget where I'm at. Verse 3, "He restores my soul." The sorrow is not permanent, it couldn't be because God restores our soul. "He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake." Here's what I want you to see: where the Lord has led you, where you find yourself today right now, that is the place where God is going to bless you without question. God is going to bless you where you find yourself now. Unless you yourself are living in sin, you are exactly where the shepherd wants you because the shepherd guides his sheep. This is the confidence that we



have as believers that there is a hidden, overarching, sovereign hand that is guiding our lives and we can trust him to lead us step-by-step to where we need to be. That means that today where you find yourself, somehow in one way or another, this is what the Lord has for you at this point in your life. That's pretty amazing. That has a revolutionary impact. I'll tell you, I wish I had heard some of these things 25 years ago. My life would have been a whole lot easier if I had known these things and embraced them early on in my Christian life instead of getting kicked around beforehand.

This has a practical impact on life. This is very practical. I hope you see that. I hope you see that what we're talking about is very, very practical. This affects day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment living. And it has this effect, one of the effects that it has is that this keeps you, this assurance that the Lord guides you, keeps you from making life mistakes out of a sense of panic. "You know, I'm in these bad circumstances. I'm in this adverse circumstance. I have to assert control over them." Or, "I have to get out of here. I need to leave. I've got to get out of this situation." Look, when you understand as a believer that the Lord is your shepherd and that he protects you and he guides you, that has a practical effect on the way that you think about life. You can no longer reason, you can no longer think like what I'm about to describe. You can no longer reason on the level of, "I don't like this and therefore I have to get out of here." You can't reason that way. It doesn't mean that you always stay exactly right where you're at otherwise I wouldn't be here in Northern Kentucky today, right? But you can't reason at that level. The bare fact, follow me here and I'm speaking pastorally here with compassion for you: the bare fact that you are unhappy or dissatisfied in circumstances does not justify a major change in life circumstances until you have wrestled with the reality that God's providence has brought you to this point in life, until you have worked through and said, "Okay, I am here somehow by the guiding hand of God because God is a shepherd who guides his sheep. Here I am, somehow God has guided me to this point. Now, what do I do with that? How do I respond to that in faithful obedience? In faithful trust to this God?" So this really has a liberating impact on your life because you're no longer the victim of your circumstances and you're no longer so threatened by your circumstances that you're always afraid of what tomorrow might bring. One of the common failures in Christian living, I would say, is people living in that fear of what tomorrow might bring and when you've gone through some difficult trials, I understand that. "You know, man, this happened yesterday. What's going to happen tomorrow?" I understand the temptation to live that way but when you're confident that the Lord is your shepherd, it changes everything and you say, "Okay, whatever tomorrow brings it's going to be because God guided me into that and I can trust him for that. I can have confidence in that even if it hurts."

So as a shepherd, God provides. He guides us. That's what we've seen in verses 2 and 3. There's a third aspect of him being a shepherd here and we can put it this way: he protects you. He protects you. Look at verse 4. He provides in verse 2. He guides in verse 3. He protects you in verse 4. David says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me," look at the end here, "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." Now, when David says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," again, you can see he's using that metaphorical language.

Death doesn't bring a literal valley surrounded by mountains, he's talking in a metaphorical way. But he's alluding to a reality. The hill country of that area of the world is broken up by narrow and steep ravines. They are difficult to climb. They are dark and gloomy. There are caves and sometimes wild animals or robbers would hide out and bring an attack on the flock and so as you're going through these valleys and these ravines, it was a difficult, treacherous, dangerous time in the day as the sheep were brought through those kinds of geographic areas. And to pass through those ravines was more difficult than to find the right path that simply went over an open hill or an open plain. It was dangerous, but what David is saying is that the shepherd knew those risks and he took the sheep, a shepherd takes the sheep safely through them.

Now, notice this and we've kind of already alluded to this some, notice that in the underlying reality of this metaphor, the shepherd sometimes had to take his sheep through dangerous terrain. That was just part of it. In order to provide for them, in order to enact his overarching care for the flock, sometimes he had to take them through areas where there was serious danger and immediate threats to their well-being. What David is saying is that in a spiritual sense, the straight paths, get this, the right paths as God defines rightness, the right path for your life sometimes will take you through what seems to be very treacherous, dangers, sorrowful terrain, even the darkest experience of death. You go through that valley of death; you go through and death is right in your face. What David is saying, "Even then, even when I walk through that then, God is still my shepherd. He is still leading me all the way through."

Look at what he says. You have to keep your eyes on the text. I realize sometimes preachers just want to tell emotional stories and they can move you and make you cry. That doesn't help in the long run, does it? That stuff doesn't help in the long run. What helps is understanding and David says, "Even though I walk through this treacherous terrain," he says, "I fear no evil." What a statement of confidence, "I am not afraid and how is it that I'm not afraid? It's because you are with me." There is a theological understanding that undergirds his statement there, "I am not afraid because you are with me."

Then he goes on and he says, "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." Somehow this rod and staff is connected with the confidence that David expresses. What is he referring to? Well, shepherds carried with them a rod and a staff and the rod was like a heavy club. You could think of it as a heavy club, a big ball bat that had flints and nails embedded in the barrel end of the club and the shepherd would use that when wild animals would attack the sheep; that was his weapon of defense of them. He'd go and he would club these wild animals off until they released the sheep and that was part of his protection of them. The staff is a shepherd's crook about 6 feet long with a crook at the end of it. The shepherd would use that to control the sheep. When they started to stray off the path, he'd reach out and pull them back or poke them and prod them so that they are going in the right direction. It was a means of discipline that brought even greater security to the sheep. What David is saying here is that the rod and staff represent God's constant presence and protection to guide the sheep. That God uses the force of his omniscience, the force of his omnipotence and he exercises his divine power in order to protect us as

his sheep. We don't see the visible manifestation of that but it's no less real simply because our eyes don't perceive it. God watches over his sheep and David says, "That is my assurance of safety, of true guidance and that I am ultimately going to reach the right destination. There is this invisible reality that God is my shepherd and because of that, I am not afraid. Because of that, I am comforted even in the midst of the threats." He said, "Why would I be afraid? The shepherd has the capacity, the knowledge and the instruments necessary to protect me." David says, "Therefore I'm not afraid. I fear no evil, even in the darkest valley of all."

Now, let's think just a little further about this before we move on. Do you understand that in this verse David is presupposing danger along the path? He is assuming there will be threats. He is assuming there will be difficult trials. He is assuming all of it and the mature Christian as he studies the Scriptures and he reflects on life, the mature Christian understands that there will be major, major obstacles along the way. It is a distortion of tragic proportions that some preachers promise health and wealth and prosperity to their flocks. That is a total distortion of reality. It is a total denial of what Scripture would teach us to speak as we live life in a fallen world. No, to the contrary, the comfort is not that we are going to use Christ in order to escape the obstacles of life, the comfort is that God is going to be our shepherd that leads us through them, leads us to the ultimate destination. That is a greater triumph than health and wealth could ever be, that we face the challenges, we engage competition, as it were, on the spiritual athletic field and we have victory in the end. It's not the absence of conflict, it's the victory through the conflict that is our hope. David says, "God will use his power to protect us even in the midst of the danger."

In John Bunyan's classic book "The Pilgrim's Progress," he uses a picture of a man walking on a journey to depict the nature of Christian life and at one point, the lead character comes to a path, a point in the path where there are 2 ferocious lions on either side of the path and it looks like they are going to rip him to shreds if he walks down the path that way. Well, as he walks through, he walks straight into the face of that danger and stays right in the middle of the path which represents his obedience to God's will for his life and he walks through as those lions are lunging at him. What he found in retrospect was that the lions were on leashes. They had been restrained beforehand so that they could not destroy him and tear him to bits. As long as he was in the middle of the path of obedience, God had restrained those lions from destroying him.

In the same way, beloved, you can trust your shepherd to order life so that no ultimate harm comes to you. Even in the worst scenario, God ordains your circumstances. This is really important what I'm going to say here over the next couple of minutes. God has ordained your circumstances and he is orchestrating your circumstances so that you can pass through them and prosper spiritually in the midst of them. No question about it. Just obey him so that you don't stray into unnecessary harm. Don't panic. Don't do it your own way. Trust him and follow him and see the blessing of what David is talking about. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able." Let me say that again, he "will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able but

with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it."

When you understand Psalm 23, when you understand the biblical teaching of the faithfulness of God to his people, you realize something really amazing: the very existence of your trial means that you have the capacity to endure it and prosper in the midst of it. It has to be that way. The shepherd would never expose his sheep to dangers that would ultimately destroy them. God never exposes us to danger that is ultimately going to destroy us and so if he has brought trials into your life, if he has brought sorrows into your life, realize that even though it does not seem possible that this could possibly be true at the moment, realize that the very existence of your trial is a manifestation of the fact that God is providing and will provide the strength for you to endure it and to prosper in the midst of it over time. So rather than the trial being a manifestation of what you cannot do, what you cannot accept, to the very contrary, it's the exact opposite: the very existence of the trial is proof that God has given and will continue to give you the capacity to walk through it. It changes the whole perspective. The bigger the challenge, apparently the greater the strength. You know, I realize that it takes time to absorb that and to embrace this and all of that. That's okay. These are meant to be truths that define the way we view life. It's the way that we define our worldview. It's the way we define how we walk through life and those things don't come superficially. These things are meant to be meditated on at a deep level and to let them form the long-term approach to life.

Well, that's God as your shepherd. He provides. He guides. He protects. David is going to change the imagery now on us in verse 5. Not everyone sees the passage this way but I believe in verse 5 he's changing the imagery and that will bring us to our second point for this morning. He goes from saying that, "God is my shepherd," to saying that, "God is my host." My host, h-o-s-t. Let's read verse 5, David says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows." David here is comparing the Lord, I believe, he's comparing the Lord to the host of a banquet that he has prepared for his guests and you can picture a banquet and the table is almost bending under the weight of abundant food and drink and the cultural background of this brings out the meaning vividly. First of all, what does a host do? First of all, a host welcomes you. He welcomes you. God as your host welcomes you in verse 5. He says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." He welcomes us to his table and in the culture of the Old Testament, being a guest at someone's home had more implications than it does for us today. You know, we invite people over, we enjoy the fellowship and the company and we send them on their way and we really don't think that there's any kind of deep relational significance to that beyond the event. But in the Old Testament and sometimes still in those cultures today, to eat at someone's home entitled the guest to the host's protection. There is a sense of the host when someone is at his table is obligated to protect them. One writer puts it this way speaking of this culture, "When a host accepts a man to be his guest," talking about the Old Testament culture here, "he agrees," get this, "he agrees at whatever cost to defend his guest from all possible enemies during the time of his entertainment. An American missionary," I'm still quoting here, "an American missionary was entertained by an Indian Governor and the

host took a piece of roast mutton and handed it to the missionary and as he did so he said this," because the American missionary wasn't familiar with the custom, "he said, 'Do you know what I have done? By this act I have pledged to you every drop of my blood so that while you are in my territory, no evil shall come to you. While you're in my territory, we are brothers.'"

What David is saying is that, "That is the kind of protection I have. The Lord treats me like an honored guest. The Lord has pledged his protection to me. The Lord has committed the fullness of his divine resources to my protection." So when he says, "Yahweh, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies," what he's saying is, "I feel utterly secure. I know that I am utterly secure because I am in your world under your protection and you have pledged to protect me from every enemy," because that's what a host does. When you think about it, think about it this way: isn't that exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ did? He gave us the drops of his blood for the securing of our soul. That is how extensive the Lord's commitment to us as our host is, is that Christ literally shed his blood in order to secure our souls: to secure our souls from the enemy of our own sin; the enemy of the devil; the enemy of God's wrath and judgment. Christ shed his own blood for the protection of our souls. That is the measure by which you can evaluate the Lord's commitment to protect you. It went to the shedding of the lifeblood of Christ 2,000 years ago. That's how great, that's how vast, that's how deep the protection we enjoy at the hand of the Lord. It's amazing.

But it's more than that. It's more than he welcomes you; you just get lost in the immensity of this Psalm. It's not just that he welcomes you, it's that he also gives privilege to you. As a host he welcomes you and he gives privilege to you. Look at the end of verse 5 with me, he says, "You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows." This passage is communicating further rich truth about the nature of David's relationship with God himself, the favor of God upon him. One traveler from the early 1800s, this is describing another cultural custom, and one traveler from the early 1800s described it this way talking about this "anointing my head with oil, my cup overflows." He recorded this in his diary, he said, "I once had this great ceremony performed on me in the house of a great and rich Indian in the presence of a large company." There were a lot of people there. He said, "The gentleman of the house poured upon my hands and arms a delightful perfume. He put a golden cup into my hands and poured wine into it until it ran over." No need to worry about spilling, there's plenty more where that came from. "He was assuring me that it was a great pleasure to him to receive me and that I should find a rich supply in his house." That's the picture that David is using here. "You anoint my head with oil; My cup overflows. Somehow I am an honored, privileged guest in the house of Yahweh as a believer in Christ. My cup overflows. The provision of God is so generous and abundant that I'm not going to suffer lack during my time here." He's speaking in spiritual terms.

Sometimes people go through physical poverty and we understand that but God in his lavish generosity has brought David into a position of privilege and he does the same thing for you as a believer in Christ. If you are a Christian, you are in a position of being an ongoing recipient of the fullness of the blessing of God: his provision, his guidance, his protection and you as a believer in Christ are welcome in his presence. Can you

imagine being permanently welcomed into the presence of a king, an earthly king? And here we are privileged and welcomed into the presence of the God of the Bible, the God of the universe. The privilege is astonishing and this is a result of God's initiation. This is what God has done for us. It's not that we've earned our way into that kind of presence, it's that it is an overflowing of the goodness and the graciousness and the generosity of God that he would bestow all of that upon us unworthy though we would be, that he would bestow that kind of privilege and welcome us into his presence where we are always welcome. That's the position that you enjoy as a believer in Christ. Under the protection of a shepherd in the welcome and the embrace of a magnificent, generous host who has unlimited resources at his disposal.

What do you say in response to that? How do you respond to those kinds of magnificent truths? Well, our third point this morning, I think I said I had 2 points, there is actually 3. Trouble with counting. That's what happens when you're from Indiana. 1, 2, 3. We struggle with that. Sometimes I would say those jokes in reverse to other geographic regions but I'm not going to do that.

Third point. What do you say in response to the fact that God is your shepherd and God is your host? Third point: trust is your response. Trust is your response. If these things that we've been saying through the first 5 verses are true and they are, then there is only one place where your soul can go. This verse, verse 6, expresses how you should respond as you look to difficult times in an uncertain future. Look at what David says in verse 6. He's summarizing it and saying, "This is the spiritual impact that all of these things have on me." Verse 6, "Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." What can I say? What is the outcome of this in light of the certainty that God is my shepherd and in light of the certainty that he has welcomed me as a host? Then there's only one conclusion. There is only one possible outcome that will be the signature statement about the biography of my life. It's that, "Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Because God is our shepherd, because he is our host, God will bless us with his goodness. His blessing will surround his children like attendants who wait upon a guest. Not occasionally but all the days of my life. A shepherd never abandons his sheep. The host cares for his guests. That is the Lord's design. That is how he deals with us and the only proper, obedient, worthy response is for us to say, "Lord, I trust you. Lord, I'm confident in your goodness and mercy. I'm not going to question your intentions in these circumstances in my life because I don't measure your goodness by circumstances, ultimately I measure your goodness by the blood of Christ shed on the cross for the salvation of my soul. I measure your intentions by what Scripture says about your character, your goodness, your faithfulness, your holiness. It could never be any other way than the fact that somehow your goodness and mercy are going to be upon my life now and forever." That's what the proper response is. Beloved, let me tell you, if you know Christ, you live no matter how weak you may feel right now, if you know Christ, you live life from a position of strength. The future cannot bring you ultimate harm and I

emphasize the word "ultimate." It's not that it won't bring trials but it cannot bring you ultimate harm because the shepherd is always with you.

And Christian, do you realize that David wrote this before the time of Christ? We look back; he was still looking ahead to the cross. We now look back on the cross and realize that we view life from an even greater position of strength than David did. Jesus Christ said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." This Psalm 23 is fulfilled in Christ and he is such a great shepherd that he lay down his life to take away the greatest threat to your well-being, the threat of God's judgment against your soul because you and I have sinned against him. How great a shepherd is he? How fully committed is he to the protection of his sheep? Look to the cross and find your answer and interpret all of life in the consequence of the shadow of the cross.

The perfection of his love led to a perfect sacrifice and everything else is a lesser issue by comparison. If he did the greater thing, he will do the lesser thing as well. What grace is this? A righteous shepherd slain in your place so that you could be forgiven and eternally secure in the presence of a holy God. This is it. We have this God. We have this Christ as our shepherd. This Christ. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." This is the shepherd that leads us through the pleasant fields, through the treacherous valleys and all points in between, always leading for his name's sake, always leading to accomplish his glory in our lives and to do good to us in the end. That's why we can say, "I trust him." That's why we say, "Surely, without doubt, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of this life and beyond this life, I'm going to be with him forever."

It comes out good in the end, beloved. You understand that, right? It comes out good for you in the end if you're a believer in Christ. There is no other possible outcome. It cannot come out any other way than for you ultimately even if you don't see it now, I understand we don't see it now, but the ultimate outcome and that's why it's trust. We walk by faith, not by sight. It's not by what we see, it's by the character of God. We measure this by the character of God. We measure it by the certainty of his goodness and mercy to us. We say, "Do you know what? The only outcome for me is good in the end and therefore whatever transpires between now and then, that ultimate good outcome, I'll trust him for it."

Let's pray together.

*Father, we look at these magnificent truths and thank you for them. We thank you that you are our Shepherd. We thank you for the privilege that you have given to us even as we speak to you now in prayer, O God, to realize we have the privilege of addressing you directly. Not through a priest, not through some other intermediary, we come directly into your presence because that's the privilege that you have given to us as believers in Christ. Lord Jesus, we thank you that on the cross you took our very sins into your own body and received the punishment for them. God imputed our sin to your account and punished you so that the punishment that we deserve might be fulfilled and we would never have to feel the brunt of it. Thank you for that. You are indeed the Good Shepherd.*

*You have been so good and so faithful and as we look to an uncertain future in light of your character, in light of your care, your certain care for us, we affirm together corporately and we confirm in our own individual hearts that we trust you that your goodness and your lovingkindness will follow us, will be manifested in this life and that we will enjoy it more perfectly and forever in your house in heaven. So Lord, we do trust you in response to what you have said about yourself in your word. We thank you for your goodness to us and we offer the rest of this time to you as an act of worship in Jesus' name. Amen.*