

There cannot be much argument about the fact that the most famous series of words ever written are the 57 words written in Hebrew by David known as Psalm 23. This psalm is often read or printed at every funeral. This psalm is a favorite for those hurting or dying. This psalm has been put to music.

The superscription indicates that this is a psalm of David. It was probably written when David was older as opposed to younger because he had seen God deliver him many times. In this psalm, David writes from the perspective of a sheep, who has a total dependency on his shepherd.

The real problem in the psalm is how many metaphors are actually presented. We know there is the shepherd and sheep metaphor (23:1-4). But others see a guide and traveler metaphor (23:3-4) and others see a host and a guest metaphor (23:5).

It seems to me the solution to the problem is found in the pronouns. The main metaphor David uses for God is the noun “shepherd,” which means he is picturing himself as a sheep. From **verse 1**, David uses pronouns to describe God and himself. Since the only metaphorical noun used for God is “shepherd,” and since the purpose of a pronoun is to take the place of a noun, we draw the conclusion that the entire psalm is a shepherd/sheep metaphor.

There is no question that we may connect this shepherd metaphor to God and to Jesus Christ.

- 1) In John 10:11, Jesus Christ is the “good shepherd” who dies for the sheep.
- 2) In Heb. 13:20, Jesus Christ is the “great shepherd” who is alive for the sheep.
- 3) In I Pet. 5:4, Jesus Christ is the “chief shepherd” who returns for the sheep.

Now the primary theme of the psalm is to show the tremendous benefits of having the Lord as the shepherd of your life. Robert Ketchum said that one time a little 4 ½ year old girl was asked to recite the 23rd Psalm. The first verse says “The LORD is my shepherd I shall not want.” Well the girl misspoke and said “The LORD is my shepherd that is all I want.” She was very near the actual theme of the psalm which is this:

WHEN GOD IS SHEPHERDING ONE’S LIFE, THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR BECAUSE GOD IS COMFORTING, CARING, GUIDING, CONTROLLING AND PROTECTING IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE OF LIFE.

Now the first part of **verse 1** sets the stage—“The LORD is my shepherd.” David personalizes God. He does not say the LORD is a shepherd. He does not say the LORD is everybody’s shepherd. He does not say the LORD is their shepherd. **What he does say is “The LORD is my shepherd.”**

So if we are going to have the benefits of the psalm, then the LORD must be our shepherd. What are the prerequisites in this Grace Age for having that be true? Jesus spelled out two:

- (Prerequisite #1)** - God’s sheep hear God’s Word. John 10:27a
(Prerequisite #2) - God’s sheep obey God’s Word. John 10:27b

Meet these prerequisites and you may say “I have God as my shepherd.”

BENEFIT #1 – When God is our shepherd, we shall not want. **23:1a**

The actual Hebrew word “want” is one that means to be devoid of something, to lack something or to be without something. The particular flare of this word is to be in such a diminished condition that one finds himself wanting something (William Gesenius, *Hebrew Lexicon*, p. 295).

What every sheep can know with certainty is that when God is shepherding a person’s life, he will not ever find himself devoid or lacking anything he needs to become a healthy sheep. Dr. Haddon Robinson said, “Because the Lord is my Shepherd I shall never want at any time for any thing I need” (*Psalms 23*, p. 9).

BENEFIT #2 – When God is our shepherd, He will make us lie down in green pastures. **23:2a**

God will always lead His sheep to places where they can be well-fed in “green pastures.” They will have such a sense of security in these places that they will actually lie down. In order for sheep to lie down, they must feel totally secure. Sheep are jumpy animals. They frighten easily and run in any direction. If they fear anything they will not lie down. This pasture language is important. When one is allowing God to shepherd one’s life, God will never lead His sheep to barren and fruitless places. God will always lead His sheep to the fruitfulness and the tranquility of green pastures and the sheep of God will always know they are protected and cared for to the extent they can relax and lie down wherever God leads them.

BENEFIT #3 – When God is our shepherd, He will lead us beside quiet waters. **23:2b**

Sheep need water. It has been estimated that 70% of a sheep is comprised of water. The job of the shepherd is to find good water for the sheep. There were four sources: 1) Dew; 2) Wells; 3) Springs; 4) Streams.

Now sheep are jumpy and are afraid of running water. Sheep are afraid of the noise, they are afraid of the depth of the water; they are afraid of being swept away and they are afraid that the wool can become so water-logged that the sheep can drown. Good shepherds always try to find a nice quiet, safe place for the sheep to drink.

David had seen God do that for him. David had learned that no matter what the rage or chaos or confusion, God cared for him. The person who will allow God to shepherd his life is one that will discover that no matter how hectic the pace of situation, God will lead His sheep to places of tranquility where he may be cleaned and refreshed.

BENEFIT #4 – When God is our shepherd, He will restore our soul. **23:3a**

The Hebrew word “restore” is one that means to return or turn about (*Ibid.*, p. 807). The idea behind this imagery is that the shepherd spots the sheep that has wandered away and is in some trouble and he goes after it and gets it and takes it and restores it to its original condition.

For a sheep there were lots of dangerous things that could happen if it wandered away. Animals such as lions and bears were eager to prey upon such a sheep. David had actually seen this— I Sam. 17:34-36. There were threats of thieves who would steal sheep and there were dangers where a sheep could fall off a cliff and be destroyed.

As a good shepherd, David would go looking for those wandering sheep in order to bring them back and restore them. David learned God had done that for him. There were times when David wandered away from the paths of God and God came looking for him and came to his rescue. God came looking for his erring sheep and turned him around and brought him back into a close, safe relationship with Him.

BENEFIT #5 – When God is our shepherd, He will guide us in paths of righteousness. **23:3b**

The paths of righteousness were the paths that were right to walk on. In the wilderness areas, there were several paths on which a sheep could walk. To a sheep one path looked just as good as another. But a wise shepherd knew not all paths are the same and not all paths are right and safe for the sheep to travel.

The actual word “guide” is one that refers to leading a sheep in the sense of guiding and guarding (*Ibid.*, p. 537). What David came to realize is that when God was shepherding his life, He always guided him and guarded him on the right path. God will always lead His sheep in the right direction.

Now we may observe that one reason why God will always lead His sheep on right paths is because of His name. Even when His sheep have wandered off the right path, he goes and gets them and brings them back to the right path because His name is on the line. It is like Arthur Clarke said in his commentary on Psalms, God’s name sake guarantees that God’s sheep are assured of “guardianship and guidance...until home is reached” (*Psalms*, p. 79).

BENEFIT #6 – When God is our shepherd, we will fear no evil even when walking through shadows of death. **23:4a**

In order to get sheep to where they need to go, often times a shepherd would need to lead them up into the mountains and to get to the high areas, one must travel through dark valleys.

Now the word “shadow” is one that speaks of thick darkness, which were places known for various things that could produce death (*Ibid.*, p. 711). Those dark valleys were dangerous because usually there were things hidden in the dark shadows that could do sheep great harm.

As we have already mentioned, lions, bears and wolves were nocturnal predators watching and waiting for prey. When sheep would come into a dark shadowy area, they would huddle around their shepherd and trust their shepherd to lead them through it. Phillip Keller believes that this is why David changes the pronoun here from “my” to “I.”

There had been many times David had walked through dark valleys filled with things that could kill him. But he made it because God was with him. We cannot get to higher levels without traveling through many dark valleys—disappointments, frustrations, discouragements, dilemmas and despairs are designed to bring us to a plush relationship with God. We will get through the dark valleys because God will walk with us. There is no darker valley than death.

BENEFIT #7 – When God is our shepherd, His rod and staff will comfort us. **23:4b**

The nouns “rod” and “staff” are different words. One of the words is more aggressive and one is more passive. The word “rod” refers to a stick or club that was used for beating, striking, chastening or shepherding. This particular word was used to describe a shepherd’s rod or crook (*Ibid.*, p. 801). According to Brown-Driver-Briggs, this rod was used as a weapon to smite and slay (BDB, pp. 986-987). The word “staff” refers to something upon which one leans upon or is supported by. According to Brown-Driver-Briggs, this staff was used more for support than for a weapon (*Ibid.*, p. 1044).

Fred Wight, in his *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*, says that this shepherd’s “rod” was like a policeman’s club. It was made of oak, it was relatively short and it had a knob at one end. He said in the knob, nails were often placed in order to make it the ideal weapon. He said it was very useful for protection and a shepherd would not be without it. He said the “staff” was a stick five to six feet long which sometimes had a crook at the end. It was used more as a cane or walking stick and was very useful for handling sheep and exploring new areas (pp. 149-150).

The big difference between “rod” and “staff” seems to be that the “staff” was used more for control and the “rod” was used more for combat .

The shepherd who had these tools was an armed and ready shepherd. His sheep could have confidence that no matter whom or what the enemy or situation, their shepherd was fully prepared to defend them and care for them.

David realized this about God. David knew that having God as his shepherd meant that God was watching out for him and was fully armed and able to protect and defend him. God had protected David time and time again (Ps. 56, 58, 59, 62, 140, 141). David found great comfort in the truth that Almighty God, who was armed with all weapons of sovereignty, was looking out for him.

BENEFIT #8 – When God is our shepherd, He will prepare a table before me in my enemies presence. **23:5a**

What David had come to realize is that God had provided for him right in the presence of enemies. Now a shepherd would actually prepare a table for the sheep. What we mean is that a shepherd would take his sheep to a table area, or bench area or high plateau area and would prepare it by walking up and down making sure it was a safe place for sheep. He would walk up and down and look for deadly adders and predatory animals that could harm the sheep. Once he had inspected the ground, he would permit the herd of sheep to graze it.

David had literally seen God do this for him. God took care of David and provided for David when he was surrounded by enemies. He even provided what he needed when he was in enemy territory. He would not allow enemies to harm him.

BENEFIT #9 – When God is our shepherd, He will anoint our head with oil. **23:5b**

Now when a shepherd would anoint a sheep with oil, it meant the sheep belonged to him and had the status of being one of his sheep. A shepherd would only anoint his sheep, not someone else's. So in the metaphor there is a royal position given by this anointing.

Shepherds would anoint their sheep with oil for two reasons: 1) As a repellent against various parasites. Philip Keller said there were various types of flies, mosquitoes, gnats and other minute winged parasites that would attack the sheep in summer months and a good repellent was oil. 2) As medicine for sheep. A shepherd would put oil on the wounds and cuts and scratches and bruises of his sheep. Sheep were known to get these on their head area.

What this language describes is a shepherd who is personally caring for each sheep, seeing to it that he would be healed of any scratches, wounds or hurts. God is our shepherd and will always patch up His sheep when they have been under attack.

BENEFIT #10 – When God is our shepherd, our cup overflows. **23:5c**

One who is shepherded by God will discover that blessings will overflow. The picture here is of a shepherd providing so much water for the sheep that it overflows. Often a shepherd would draw the water up out of a well and then would pour it into a stone cup so the sheep could drink. The overflowing cup gave plenty of water to the sheep.

When God is shepherding a person's life, he will not only have enough, but he will have an overflowing amount of the blessings of God. Dr. Haddon Robinson said with God, "the calf is always the fatted calf; the robe is always the best robe; the joy is unspeakable and the peace passes understanding. There is no grudging in God's goodness. He does not measure His goodness by drops like a druggist filling a prescription. It comes to us in floods. If only we recognized the lavish abundance of His gifts, what a difference it would make in our lives!" (Cited from Dr. Chuck Swindoll, *Living Beyond the Daily Grind*, Vol. 1, p. 79).

BENEFIT #11 – When God is our shepherd, goodness and lovingkindness will follow us all the days of our life. **23:6a**

One commentator observed the “goodness” refers to God giving us good things we do not deserve, and the “lovingkindness,” or “mercy” is God not giving us what we do deserve.

The goodness of God and the mercy of God will follow the sheep of God all of the days of his life. That word “follow” means to pursue and run after. God will grant His sheep good things and be merciful all the days of my life.

Do you see that? If God is the shepherd of your life, you will experience good things and merciful things all the days of your existence.

BENEFIT #12 – When God is our shepherd, we will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. **23:6b**

Now do not miss the verb. It does not say “I hope to dwell” or “I might dwell”; it says “I will dwell” in the house of the Lord forever. When God is shepherding our life, we are guaranteed that we will one day go home and be there forever.

The greatest reality of any person’s life is to be able to say, “The Lord is my Shepherd.”