

The Lord is My Shepherd, Psalm 23
Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
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This morning we come to the best known Psalm of all the Psalms, and one of the most popular passages of Scripture in the entire Bible. Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd. This Psalm contains such comforting truth for us, about our Lord and Savior. These are words we can cling to when times are difficult. There is a confidence in these words, as we focus on our good shepherd who cares for us so well, who will lead us through this life, and who will then receive us into His eternal dwelling.

I'll begin by reading Psalm 23 again for us, and then I'll lead us in a prayer. And then we'll go through these 4 points you see on your outline.

He Leads Me

Our first point is that He leads us. There's a great sense of security that comes from knowing we have a leader. We have a shepherd who is watching out for us and who will guide us in the way we ought to go.

Have you felt this week like you need a shepherd? I hope you have felt that way, because it's certainly true. Whether you're aware of it or not at any given moment, it's a constant need we have. We are the sheep, and we need a shepherd.

I marvel at the fact that God made sheep. Sheep are fascinating creatures. They're not known for being very smart. In fact, they're known to do some pretty stupid things. I've heard stories of sheep walking right into fire, not because they're being pushed into the fire, and not because they're trying to impress their friends or because they're on a dare or anything like that, but just because they weren't paying attention. I've also heard that sheep can lie down, and if they end up rolling over on their back they can get stuck there and can't get themselves up. Shepherds call this being cast. A sheep can become cast if it lies down on the ground, and maybe its fleece has become too large, or maybe the sheep has become a bit too heavy, a bit overweight, and maybe there's a bit of a depression in the ground, and it positions itself in a certain way and its center of gravity shifts so that its short little legs come off the ground. And then the sheep is completely helpless. It may become frantic and wiggle around trying to get its feet back on the ground. But that usually just makes it worse. Then it's really stuck. Its lying there on its back, and then the blood flow is restricted to its legs. The legs fall asleep. And, if there's no one to help, the sheep will die there. Sheep need a shepherd.

And it's humbling to consider the fact that when God created sheep, knowing how needy they would be . . . God made sheep with us in mind. He knew that He would use sheep to describe our spiritual condition. As Isaiah 53 says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way . . ." God knew what He was doing in designing sheep in the funny way they are: top heavy, helpless, needing a shepherd, desperately needing someone to lead them and provide for them.

A few years ago, when Stacy and I were in the Middle Easter, when the Hovis's still lived there, I heard Ken share a bizarre story about sheep as he was leading a youth lesson at their church. Later I looked this up on the web and found the news story about it with some additional details. This was reported in Istanbul, Turkey in 2005. A large number of shepherds were eating their breakfast while their sheep were grazing together. One sheep wandered over a cliff and died. The next sheep followed, then another, and yet another, until nearly 1,500 sheep had gone over the cliff. How tragic. The really bizarre part of the story is that although 1,500 sheep walked off the cliff, only about 450 died. The rest of them had such a cushion they fell on to, that they survived. Still, the loss to these shepherding families was estimated to be about \$100,000.¹

This story, and many other examples, show us how stupid sheep can be. Without the attentive guidance of the shepherd, the sheep will walk themselves off a cliff, get themselves stuck on their back, walk into the fire, get lost.

We desperately need the Good Shepherd to lead us. Take comfort today, brothers and sisters, that we have a Good Shepherd who calls us and leads us and saves us. This is very good news. And if you're not yet a believer, I pray that today you will come to know this Shepherd. Don't try to make it on your own. You'll end up stuck on your back somewhere, or wandering off a cliff or into a fire. You need a loving and powerful Shepherd watching over you.

Notice in verse 1 how personal these words are. This is a Psalm of David. And David is speaking of the Lord, and then speaking to the Lord, in a very personal way. It's certainly true that we are part of a larger community. The Lord has many sheep who are part of His flock. But what a beautiful thing that each one of us can speak of Him, and speak to Him, so personally like this. Read vv. 1-3

Decades ago a man named Phillip Keller wrote a book called, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Phillip Keller was a pastor who had also worked for 8 years as a shepherd of sheep. And he

¹ http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2005-07-08-sheep-suicide_x.htm

shares about things like sheep being cast, and how they are so desperate for the help of the shepherd. He also shares that sheep don't easily lie down. The circumstances need to be just right in order for a sheep to lie down. Sheep can get spooked easily. They're fearful. So in order for them to lie down, they need to feel very assured that there's no danger lurking nearby. They also need to be free from friction with the other sheep. If their fleece is in friction with the fleece of the other sheep, if they're too close together, that will prevent them from lying down. Flies bothering them can also keep them from lying down. And, if their tummy isn't full, they'll just keep grazing looking for food.

David, being a shepherd, understood these things. And the scene described in these first 3 verses of Psalm 23 paint a picture of contentment and security. Here are sheep who know that the shepherd is watching over them. The shepherd has provided what I need. The shepherd makes me lie down in green pastures, where there's plenty to eat. He leads me beside still waters. There's plenty of water to drink. There's peace, and nothing to fear.

He restores my soul. Of course, the imagery of David's words are pointing to the spiritual benefit of having the Lord as our shepherd. Life may be chaotic in many ways, but we can find rest for our souls when we remember that the Lord is leading us and providing for us.

And He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. You know, some people think that God's commands in the Bible are a big downer. Like God is raining on our parade, just trying to keep us from having fun. But that couldn't be further from the truth because He loves us and He wants us to avoid the heartaches of sin and wants us to know the joy of walking closely with Him.

So, for instance, when God's Word tells us that sex is to be enjoyed only within the covenant of marriage, or that you shouldn't be involved in homosexual behavior, or that you shouldn't leave your spouse . . . Some people would consider those commands and say, "Well, God must not want me to be happy!"

But what we must embrace, as His sheep, is that the Lord is leading us in these commands (and many others), He's leading us in green pastures, and beside still waters. These paths of righteousness are where we will avoid many heartaches and where we will enjoy close communion with our Good Shepherd. It's for our joy and peace and contentment that He's leading us on these paths.

And it's for His glory. It's for His Name's sake. As we gladly submit to Him and follow His lead, it highlights His goodness. So we get the benefit, and He gets the glory. This is an awesome thing that the Lord does for us, and it's all part of His

mission to shine forth the beauty of His greatness for all the world to see. So let's follow Him passionately, and joyfully, all for His glory.

I Will Fear No Evil

Now let's go to the second point, I will fear no evil, moving on now to verse 4. See, again, how personal it is, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . ." And then notice how the wording shifts from the 3rd person to the 2nd person. In verses 1-3 David spoke of the Lord, the Shepherd, in the 3rd person – he. But now David speaks directly to the Lord in the 2nd person – you. "for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

Isn't it great that we can speak directly to the God of the universe. He is our shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd! And I can call out to Him, directly, and He will listen!

Now, we've talked about green pastures and still waters. And we rejoice that there are times in our lives when we feel like we're on the mountain top, when the Lord gives us a season of refreshment and calm. There are other times, though, when we're walking through the valley of the shadow of death (or, as the note in my Bible says, maybe that should read, "through the valley of deep darkness).

We can think of this in terms of death. Each one of us, sooner or later, is going to face death. And it will be our good shepherd who guides us through that final trial of this life. We can also think about this in terms of deep darkness, those valley seasons when various trials and hardships, heartaches, conflicts, doubts, hurts and pains, seem to be so thick upon us that we can't see the light. Well, be assured, the Good Shepherd is there with you, if you're a believer in Him. He's with you. You don't need to fear, because He will protect you. It may still be really difficult. But He's not going to leave you. And He has a purpose for you in the valley.

Remember, He's leading us. And He's leading us just as much during the valley times as He is during the time in the green pastures. James Montgomery Boice made this point: "It is important to note that the valley of the shadow of death is as much God's right path for us as the green pastures which lie beside quiet waters."

Our shepherd has a rod and staff, as David mentions in verse 4. The rod is used to defend from predators. The staff is used to direct the sheep and correct the sheep when needed. We're seeing here the power of the shepherd. He can defeat the enemy. He can also discipline us when necessary, to keep us on the right path.

Now, I want to draw in a couple other passages of Scripture to talk about our Good Shepherd and the evil He rescues us from.

John 10 is a wonderful passage where Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd. One of the great “I am” statements in the Gospel of John. 2 “I am” statements, in fact, in that passage. “I am the door of the sheep,” He says in John 10:7. And “I am the good shepherd,” in verse 11.

If you’d like to turn there, I want to read a few of these verses. John 10:7-15.

We remember David was a shepherd. And do you remember some the risky things he did to protect his sheep? As David was talking to King Saul, right before David went to fight Goliath, and King Saul was wondering, who are you to go fight this giant. David described that he had fought lions and bears to protect his sheep. It shows his courage and his skill in fighting. It also shows the extent to which he was willing to risk his own life for the sheep.

Well, here in John 10 we have Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, great David’s greater Son, who not only risks His life for the sheep, but lays down His life for the sheep. For other shepherds, losing one’s life to save the sheep is a real possibility. For Jesus, it was a certainty. This is the very thing He came to do. He came to lay down His life for the sheep.

Think of that well-known Old Testament passage in Isaiah 53, I mentioned it earlier. Think about the interesting contrast between the two ways the sheep metaphor is used. *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way [that’s what I read earlier, and then it goes on]; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.”* (Isaiah 53:6–7, ESV)

We are compared to sheep in that we go astray. To put it more bluntly, we are the stupid sheep. We don’t know where to go, and so we wander off wherever our foolish desires lead us. On the other hand, Jesus is compared to a lamb and a sheep in that he is submissive and silent and innocent. He didn’t open His mouth as He was led to the slaughter. He was silent before His shearers. He did not resist. So we see the contrast in those verses between the sinless Lamb and the wandering sheep He came to rescue. The Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. The One who suffered as an innocent Lamb in our place.

And coming back to the Psalms, it’s really insightful to notice the relationship between Psalm 22 and Psalm 23. Psalm 22 is remarkable in the way it prophecies of Jesus’ suffering. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” “they stare and gloat

over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” That is our suffering Savior in Psalm 22 who is also our Lord and shepherd in Psalm 23. And it’s because of His suffering and death for us, and His resurrection on the third day showing His triumph over sin, that He can lead us through the valley of the shadow of death in such a way that we need not fear any evil.

There’s no evil that can triumph against us. There’s no sin of our own that can condemn us. Because Jesus died in our place to forgive us and to assure our inheritance in heaven. If you’ve entrusted your life to this Savior and Shepherd, then you don’t need to fear for your soul. And you don’t need to fear death. Because death will mean we go to be with Him forever!

My Cup Overflows

The third heading on the sermon outline, my cup overflows. In verse 5 the metaphor shifts to a banquet table. We’ve reflected on the sheep and shepherd imagery of verses 1-4. Now the scene is a gracious host at a victory celebration.

David’s words are still very personal, and he’s still speaking to the Lord directly in the 2nd person, as in verse 4. Read v. 5

The Lord defeats our enemies, and it seems the picture here is of the enemies as captives, witnessing the victory feast. And there’s mention of a few aspects of the host’s hospitality and lavish provision.

You prepare a table before me. This makes me think of another passage I love, Isaiah 55, where the Lord extends an amazing invitation: “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” The Lord is so gracious to invite us into fellowship with him, the very special fellowship of dining with Him, enjoying His provision, and most importantly enjoying being in His presence.

Then there’s the mention here of anointing my head with oil. This is another thing that a good host would do. Remember, in Luke 7, how Jesus was at the Pharisee’s house, reclining at table, when the woman anointed Jesus’ feet with ointment. The Pharisees scoffed. But Jesus rebuked them, and He told them, “You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.” This was part of generous hospitality, part of warmly welcoming someone into your home. And this is what the Lord offers to us. A bountiful feast, knowing that my enemies are conquered. And He anoints my head with oil.

And my cup overflows. Like I read earlier from John 10, the Good Shepherd saying to us, “I came that they may have life

and have it abundantly.” This is so encouraging for us, brothers and sisters. We have a shepherd, we have a gracious host, who want us to thrive, who provides for us abundantly, so that our cup overflows.

Now, I know, in our experiences, a cup spilling over is not really a pleasant thing. If it’s ever happened to you, maybe pouring a 2 liter of Coke into an ice-filled glass, and you’re in a bit of a hurry, and the fizz comes right up over the top and onto the counter. That’s a hassle, because then you have to clean up the counter and wipe off the sides of the glass. Or if a young kid is trying to pour a cup of milk from a very full gallon container, that sometimes doesn’t go well.

But when it comes to our spiritual cup of blessing, it’s such a joyful thing that our Lord fills us up to overflowing. Everyone is looking for that, by the way. Everyone has a void inside them, as Blaise Pascal talked about, a God-shaped hole. We crave happiness. We desire contentment and joy and peace. And nothing in this world can fill up that spiritual cup inside of us. But the Lord fills us up to overflowing.

The spiritual blessings He pours into our lives can then spill over into the lives of those around us. It makes me think of the promise to Abram in Genesis 12, the Lord promising to bless Abram and to make him a blessing, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” That’s an overflowing cup!

This past week during Vacation Bible School, our lesson the first night was about Abram, how God chose Abram and called him to Himself. And as I think about God’s intention to bless all the families of the earth, and the statement here in Psalm 23 about our cup overflowing, I just want to tell you this morning how encouraged I was by the children who came here to VBS this week and the many volunteers who came to help, whose cups are overflowing such that they could come here and share the love of Jesus with a group of kids.

And it was really cool this week, we had a bunch of kids who were attentive and interested, and asked good questions. I got to teach the older group, and Drake and others were leading the younger group, and we really got to get these kids in the Bible, talking about sin, and God’s grace in sending Jesus to rescue us. We talked about the Trinity some. We talked about the fruit of the Spirit.

What a great opportunity it was, and we continue to have these opportunities to serve the kids here in this community, for our cups to overflow and spill over into the lives of those who don’t yet know the spiritual fulfillment that we have in Christ, or to bless other believers who need some spiritual refreshment.

Think, this week, about how the Lord is causing your cup to overflow, and how that overflow can be a blessing to someone around you.

I Shall Dwell in the House of the Lord Forever

Lastly, let's take a look at verse 6. Our final heading, I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. David concludes this great Psalm with a look to the future. A look to the future days of this life, and then beyond that, a look to eternity.

Read v. 6

Our translations read, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me . . ." But the word for follow could also be translated "pursue." The Lord, our Shepherd, our gracious host, is pursuing us with goodness and mercy. The word for mercy there is *hesed*, His steadfast lovingkindness, His covenant faithfulness.

But someone might question, "Really, is the Lord actually pursuing me with goodness and mercy? Because right now, it sure doesn't feel like it!" Well, this might be where we need to adjust our understanding of how the Lord cares for us. This is where we need to remember that there are the times in the green pastures and beside the still waters. But there are also the times in the valley of deep darkness, and in the shadow of death.

And this is where we need to remember the great promise of Romans 8:28, knowing that "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Even in the tough times. Even when it doesn't feel like we're in green pastures or beside still waters, even in the valley, the Lord is still pursuing us with goodness and mercy . . . all of the time, in all things, for all the days of our lives.

And we cast our gaze even beyond this life, to the life to come, to eternity. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever! David here expresses his confidence, and joy, in the reality that he gets to spend forever in the presence of the Lord. This is parallel to the reassuring words at the end of Romans 8. I just read the great promise of Romans 8:28. A few verses later we read this:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35–39, ESV)

Whatever trials we face in this life. Whatever valleys we go through. Even when the Lord's goodness and mercy is pursuing us in ways that feel very difficult, all of that is leading us toward an eternity of dwelling in His presence, praising Him for his kindness to us.

So as you reflect on this wonderful Psalm, as I hope you will do, very often. I hope you'll memorize it and meditate on it. Use it as a starting point for your times of prayer to the Lord. As you reflect on these comforting words, think about how the Lord is leading you, and rejoice that you don't have to fear any evil. Give thanks for how He's causing your cup to overflow. And look forward to heaven, where you will dwell with Him forever.

Questions for Personal Study and Small Group Discussion

- 1) Reflect on Psalm 23 and use this passage as a guide for personal or group prayer time. Praise the Lord for being your Shepherd. Ask Him to shepherd you in the particular ways you feel needy right now—for wisdom in a decision you need to make, for provision, protection, healing, etc.
- 2) What do you know about sheep? Why do you think God chose to make sheep the way they are? In what ways does the Bible compare us to sheep?
- 3) In what ways recently have you been aware of your sheep-like tendencies? In what ways are you aware of the fact that you need a Shepherd?
- 4) Read John 10:1-18 and compare to Psalm 23. Read Ezekiel 34:1-16 and compare to Psalm 23.
- 5) Reflect on the relationship of Psalm 22 and Psalm 23. What are the important and related truths about Jesus that these Psalms teach us?
- 6) Some additional cross-references to explore: Revelation 7:9-17; Isaiah 55:1-3 in connection with Psalm 23:5; Romans 8:31-39 in connection with Psalm 23:6.