
The Pilgrim's Loving Shepherd

Psalm 23¹²

Russ Kennedy

¹ The LORD is my shepherd,
I lack nothing.
² He takes me to lush pastures,
he leads me to refreshing water.
³ He restores my strength.
He leads me down the right paths for the sake of his reputation.

⁴ Even when I must walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff reassure me.

⁵ You prepare a feast before me in plain sight of my enemies.
You [anoint] ~~refresh~~ my head with oil;
my cup is completely full.

⁶ Surely your goodness and faithfulness
will pursue me all my days,
and I will live in the LORD's house for the rest of my life.

Psalm 23 (NET Bible Version)

The lush green valley of Psalm 23 lies between two mountains. The sheep of this pasture graze under the watchful eye of the Shepherd. The still waters trickle down in life giving flows from the sides of the mount in the 22nd Psalm, for there is Mount Calvary. The major feature of that mountain is the Savior's Cross; with the eyes of faith we might see the Redeemer in His Grace. As the sun sets toward the end of the day and the end of time, the sheep graze in the shadow of the other Mount, the one in Psalm 24. There is Mount Zion. Its major feature is the Sovereign's Crown and waiting eyes will soon see the Ruler in His Glory. Yet now, today, the sheep lie down in green pastures beside still waters. The major feature here is the Shepherd's Crook and servant eyes follow the Shepherd as He Guides.

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The Cross on Mount Calvary. There the Savior with His Grace. The Crook and the flock. There the Shepherd as our Guide. Soon, the Crown on Mt. Zion. Then, the Sovereign in His Glory.

Most of us know this as the Shepherd Psalm. And so it is. But let us imagine ourselves in a great picture gallery. As we approach this display, we find three separate, but connected paintings. As we look, we see them as follows:

Picture	Verses	Entitled
The Shepherd & the Sheep	(v.1-2)	Provision
The Guide & the Traveler	(v.3-4)	Direction
The Host & the Guest	(v.5-6)	Communion

What is highlighted all through this Psalm is David's testimony to the Lord's care.

The Lords' Care in my Life

(v. 1-3)

¹ The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

In Who He is

David looks up into the face of God and sees "my shepherd"

There is a *reverence* for Him as "the Lord." There is no loss of the majesty and position of God. David's high view of God does not make God distant.

There is a *relationship* with Him as "my Shepherd." The pilgrim has able to turn his theology into personal experience. God is not just a Shepherd as a theological statement, but also as a personal relationship.

There is a *response* that recognizes God's care for "I shall not want." He understands that the Name and Character of God means something. Since God is my shepherd, then I will not want for anything that He deems is good. Now it is God who gets to define my needs. It is important to want what God wants. Too often we feel needy because we have are so very *wantful*.

In What He does

He cares for me in that He knows what is best for me. The shepherd does these things because of the way sheep are. Each of these demonstrates that the shepherd knows His sheep and will do what is best.

A sheep will simply keep eating if there is available grass. To lie down in green pastures is a picture of not only the right place but of the right amount. The shepherd provides the best he can and then also knows when to say, "You've enough. Lie down."

A sheep will not drink from a fast moving stream. They are skittish and easily frightened. So the shepherd, in knowing them and caring for them, takes them to still waters so that they can drink here. Sadly too often, the sheep are ignoring the lovely still waters the shepherd has placed before us and have our snouts buried in the muddy pot holes.

Verse two the Lord knows that we need two things. We need our souls refreshed for we are often weary and worn. So when the flies and bugs of the world swarm around our eyes and nostrils, the shepherd pours on His rejuvenating oil so that we our souls are recharged. He knows that we easily lose our way. Sheep have little sense of direction. So the Shepherd walks ahead of them along the right paths. The sheep know His form and His voice; we follow Him.

In Why He does it

Our shepherd cares for us and does what is best for us for the sake of His Name. It is His reputation that is at stake. He promotes His own fame by the way He cares for His own. Our good and His glory are tightly intertwined. He is never having to choose one over the other. He is most glorified when He goes public with His character through His people.

The Lord's Care in my Death

(v. 4)

Our Shepherd cares for us, not only in our lives, but also when passing through death.

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 Reality of Death

The simple matter is that all of us will die. Oh, if the Lord returns in our lifetime, we will pass from this life into the presence of God through our being caught up, transformed and receiving our glorified body. But even then our life on this present earth will be over and our life in the immediate presence of Jesus will begin. But what we must be ready for is the often painful process of dying.

Sometimes it is near to us as a threat. David often experienced the shadow that death cast in the midst of battle and fleeing from enemies. He seems to have hovered near death during the terrible months of his unrepentance of adultery. Sometimes we may also feel the cold shadow that comes when death is near. Maybe in the death of a friend, a family member or our own.

Our Response to Death

But death is not something a Christian fears. We may be concerned and even anxious about the process that leads to death: sickness, pain, dementia, the slow fading away of this life. But the actual exit from *here* to *there* for a believer is to be present with the Lord when we are absent from the body.

What we will not fear in death is evil. Death is the devil's tool. It separates man from God, people from each other and ends the day in which we may believe and bow to Jesus, the King. The sting of death is sin. But the death and resurrection of Jesus has changed the nature of death for a believer. It is no longer an evil. It is a gateway. Jesus' death sanctified our dying turning it from a slide into eternal punishment into a gateway into God's presence. No evil can reach us in death. No evil can befall us in death. We who know the Lord as our shepherd will fear no evil in dying.

The Reasons for our Response

Why will we not fear evil in death? Because of the reasons the Psalmist sings about here.

We have the Lord's presence in our dying. He will be with us. He has walked the valley of death Himself. He knows its every dangerous stream, its deadly crevasses, its steep climbs and tumbling slopes. He has walked this path before us as the pilgrim, the pioneer into heaven. He will lead us through this path of righteousness as well. He will walk with us. He will ensure our safe passage. In the blink of an eye we will not see death for we will see the Lord.

We have the Lord's provision in our dying. We will not fear evil in death because the Lord has His rod and staff. Seeing them in His hand, comforts us. The shepherd's rod was used as a weapon to fend off predators. The shepherd's staff was the familiar long stick with the half hook or crook at the end. It was used to reach out to the sheep, particularly when they were in danger and pull them to the shepherd. It was a means of rescuing sheep in danger.

While walking through death's valley, you will not fear because your Shepherd is with you. You are reassured because He will defend you and will rescue you. The Lord is your shepherd. Therefore you will not want in your life or in your death.

The Lord's Care in my Past

(v. 5)

The Psalmist now looks back and reflects on the Lord's care for him in his past.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

In the Years of Preparation

In an interesting turn, David remembers what the Lord did for him in the years of preparation. Those years were marked by danger. David is recalling the days in Saul's household. Behind his own personal history He sees the guiding hand of God. God prepared the table. But that table was placed right in the presence of his enemies. This was true in his early years as a shepherd attending his father's sheep. It was true in the years he served in Saul's household. It must have been a vivid memory that quiet evening around the king's table when playing his harp Saul suddenly erupted in anger and hurled his spear at David. It was true when he led the armies of Israel for Saul and when he led them as king himself. And it was true in the latter years of his reign where in his own house, a rebellious son and hating counselors eyed him across the rich bounty of David's table.

We need to see that God's providence may put us at a table where the javelin may well be right at hand. The table God sets for us may not be where we expect. In the shaping years of our lives, God will almost certainly put us through things that are designed to change us. One of the most difficult in those years is to learn submission to those with whom we disagree. I can attest to the importance of learning to serve well, to grow in knowledge and to humble ourselves under those God places over us.

In the Appointment to Service

David here may be recalling the blessings which have flowed to him in his kingship.

He remembers being appointed to serve as king. As a young man, his head was anointed with oil by Samuel at the direction of the Lord. This was to appoint him as the next king of Israel. For all those years serving in Saul's household and army and all those years fleeing from Saul David knew that we had *been appointed by God to be king*. Yet he lived humbly and carefully and submissively as much as he could.

Jesus walked this same path as well. He lived here on earth, a poor, humble teacher. He was the Lord of the universe, yet He submitted Himself to the Father's plan and purpose. For our sake, He humbled Himself obeyed even when it meant being executed as a criminal. All the while, He knew He was the King.

In the Overflowing of Blessings

David also reflects on the times when his blessings overflowed. Here is one of those statements that is a common saying in English and moderns often do not know where it came from. God has blessed more than he is able to contain. His capacity is small but God's blessing is great. Here is where God is a bit sloppy, a bit messy. He never ever allows us a temptation bigger than we can handle. But He will bless you more than your capacity to hold. Does your cup overflow? Do you interpret all the good things in your life as coming from the Lord?

The Lord cares for you. He has brought you through the early years to train you. He has put into His service as a believer. He has poured out more blessing that you can hold. So what does that mean for our future?

The Lord's Care in my Future**(v. 6)**

The great blessings of God have caused David to be humbled yet to be joyful.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

What do they cause in us?

Assurance of His Care in this Life

The Psalmist looks forward with confidence that God will care for him through the rest of his life. Goodness and mercy will be his body guards, assigned to him who will follow him and keep him. See the holy logic? Your Lord, your shepherd has cared for you in life and in death. You have specific instances of that care in your personal history. So you know the Lord will take care of you the rest of His life. This is what God is like. This is what God has promised. This is the arc of his glory and fame.

Anticipation of His Care in the next Life

David anticipates the Lord's care in the next life. Maybe he is looking out towards the center of Jerusalem where there the tent of the Lord was. But he often is looking away into the distant future where the house of the Lord is in Mt Zion in heaven. But we know that we are the house of the Lord. And in the new heavens and new earth all of God's people will be the habitation, the house of the Lord.

The journey is ended and the shining mansion has been reached. The house is full of friends, yet each feels His full attention; each leaning on His breast. I am the Guest, and He is the Host attending my every need. See how lavish a table He has spread! He has anointed my head and filled my cup to overflowing with the richest wines of heaven. My Host calls two of His alert servants and bids them wait on me continually. Their names are Goodness and Mercy and they go with me everywhere. And I am allowed to settle down in permanent residence in His own Home forever.

Reflect and Respond

We see:

Person Lord, my Shepherd
 Lord, with me

Privilege I shall not want
 I shall not fear
 I will walk
 I will dwell

Provision He makes
 He leads
 He restores

Presence He comforts
 He prepares
 He anoints

Thus we have the Cross, the Crook, and the Crown. We love Him as the Savior, the Shepherd, and the Sovereign. We learn of His Grace, Guidance, and Glory. Our past - it is behind us on Mt. Calvary. Our present - it is lived in the valley and hillsides with our Shepherd. The future - it stretches up the slopes of Mt. Zion.

Here, we know our Shepherd as the Good Shepherd of John, the Great Shepherd of Paul, and the Chief Shepherd of Peter. We love to know Him as the Good Shepherd; to adore Him as the Great Shepherd; to worship Him as the Chief Shepherd. But O how we love to say, "MY Shepherd!"

Notes